

Grasping Opportunity

ALWAYS BE WILLING TO REACH BEYOND YOUR COMFORT ZONE, SAYS KENNETH BIGGS, ONE OF THE PROVINCE'S MOST ACCOMPLISHED AND INFLUENTIAL ACCOUNTING PROFESSIONALS

BY Kelly S. Thompson

KENNETH BIGGS' nearly 60 years in the accounting profession is proof that a career in numbers can be rich, varied and satisfying.

His career spanned 1947 to 1995, with several corporate and board roles, including director of Edmonton Telephones and Canadian Utilities and executive vice-president at Oxford Development Group.

To give back to the profession that gave him so much, Ken, who holds both a CA and CMA designation, began volunteering with CMA in 1970 and later represented Canada on the International Federation of Accountants Council. He has been recognized with several major honours by both professional bodies, including Fellowship by both the CA and CMA bodies, a Distinguished Service Award, and Lifetime Achievement Award; as well as receiving more broad recognition with the Queen's Diamond Jubilee medal.

Although his professional accomplishments are plentiful, his career stands out for his dedication to giving back to both future accountants and his community. For example, he served as chair of the Salvation Army fundraising committee and worked on advisory groups for the accounting department at the University of Alberta School of Business.

Ken is spending his retirement carefully managing his investment portfolio and dabbling in photography, a hobby that came in handy during his world travels. With a career that provided endless opportunities and a wife who supported him every step of the way, he has been one of the most influential accountants, philanthropists and professionals in Alberta's history. *Vision Alberta* talked to him about his accomplished career.

Vision Alberta: In a world where many people shift careers several times over their lives, what kept you working in accounting?

KB: The training in the accounting profession opens up a world of business opportunities. One is not limited to any one industry or to any geographic location. Canadian professional accounting designations are well respected globally. As my career unfolded, less time was spent on accounting and more of each day was on matters related to financial and general management.

VA: What were some of the most dramatic professional shifts you saw over the course of your career?

KB: The accounting profession evolved from one primarily concerned with the "attest function," or public accounting, to a broad business profession, encompassing financial and management accounting spheres of activity. In Canada and globally, a majority of professional accountants are now engaged in activity other than public accounting. Whereas in the 1950s, CMAs would be focused on cost accounting, now



the field of expertise has broadened to management accounting that covers a spectrum of management practices, including strategic planning and leadership skills necessary for the creation of long-term value for enterprises.

VA: What is one of the earliest memories you have working in your field? How were things different then?

KB: I can recall, without much pleasure, the struggle to close off accounts and consolidate financial records in the time before computers and computer software (or fax machines) in a company with multiple divisions, subsidiaries and operations in a number of countries.

VA: There is a scholarship in your name through the profession. How did this come to be? Why is it important to you?

KB: The scholarship is to assist aspiring management accountants who show leadership ability and involvement in community or other activities. It is a way to extend my interest in management accounting by recognizing and encouraging talent to this sector of the profession.

VA: What has your designation meant to you?

KB: Both the CMA and CA designations have opened doors to career opportunities through the years. The training leading to these designations laid the foundation and set the principles that guided activity and all decision-making throughout my career.

"IF ONE HAD THE LUXURY OF 'REDOING,' IT WOULD BE TO HAVE GREATER CONFIDENCE EARLIER IN MY CAREER TO TAKE ON NEW CHALLENGES AND STRETCH MORE TO GRASP OPPORTUNITIES."

VA: You serve, or have served, on several charity boards and have done a lot of volunteering. Why is giving back so vital in both your personal and professional lives?

Being involved in the profession or community or in not-for-profit enterprises all enrich life experiences and, in fact, make you a better performer in your business posts. I found that much of what was experienced from volunteer activity made me much better equipped to manage challenges experienced in my business career.

VA: If you could change one thing about your career or the way you worked, what would it be?

If one had the luxury of "redoing," it would be to have greater confidence earlier in my career to take on new challenges and stretch more to grasp opportunities. The unfortunate consequences of accounting financial training is that one becomes skilled in all things about risk and not much about reaching out and taking on new challenges.

VA: Do you have any advice to give new accountants who are just starting out in their careers?

Be always willing to reach beyond one's comfort zone. Never be satisfied with what you know and what you have achieved and consider what you need to be better prepared to strengthen your knowledge and acumen. ☺