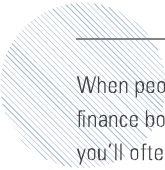


The Simple Life Cuts a Path to Prosperity

By Kate Stalter

For Mark Zaifman, finances are only part of retirement planning.



When people talk about the impact of personal finance books published in the past 25 years, you'll often hear them mention *Your Money or Your Life*, by Vicki Robin and Joe Dominguez. The book offers a blueprint for aligning finances with personal values. Its publication started a movement toward financial independence gained through simple living.

Mark Zaifman makes no secret of its profound effect on him. He read the book in 1992, shortly after it was published and became a *New York Times* bestseller. Its principles—living within your means, balancing work with the things you love to do—now serve as the foundation for Spiritus Financial Planning, the Petaluma, Calif., investment advisory and wealth-management firm he founded in 2003. The firm's holistic approach to financial planning is focused on a wide array of clients.

"It was a monumental book that changed everything in my life," he says.

At the time, Zaifman had recently moved to Northern California from New Jersey and was working as an executive recruiter with a focus on software engineers.

"In 1992, I set a goal that I would have enough money in the bank to get out of the corporate world 10 years later and be able to make a very modest income doing whatever I loved,"

he says. "I had no idea at the time it was going to be financial planning, but I knew I wanted the financial freedom to pursue whatever passion really made my heart sing."

Setting the Stage

Zaifman grew up on the East Coast, the son of European immigrants. As is common in immigrant communities, his parents started small businesses to support the family. As a child, Zaifman had the job of counting the money at the end of the day. That spurred his interest in numbers and finance. A few years later, he used bar mitzvah gift money to open his first brokerage accounts.

He earned a degree in tax accounting from Monmouth University in 1983 and eventually joined with three business partners to form Management Recruiters of Bridgewater. The New Jersey-based firm specialized in placing accountants, auditors, and other financial officers. After six years, he sold his partnership in the firm and with his new wife, Patricia, moved to California, where he shifted his focus to technology recruiting.

By 2002, he was working for Texas Instruments and recruiting students at Stanford University. He didn't forget his goal of becoming financially independent. That year, Zaifman and his wife had banked enough money that he was able to leave the corporate world.

He had several career options at that point, but being a devotee of *Your Money or Your Life*, the financial-planning field grabbed his attention. It allowed him to use his accounting background and help people identify problem areas when it came to their relationship with money.

"That phrase, 'relationship with money,' is so powerful, because a lot of people don't even think they have a relationship with money," he says.

A New Path

Rather than hang out a shingle and start looking for clients, Zaifman spent the first year doing *Your Money or Your Life* workshops in the Bay Area. His planning business grew out of these free events. Like many young firms, Spiritus had a slow ramp-up, though Zaifman was prepared for that, mentally and financially.

"About 50% of my work was pro bono, because I needed to get the experience. I wanted to hone my skills and practice different methods of financial planning," he says. "For the people who did pay, I charged very low fees, almost like a nonprofit or a credit union would charge."

Over the next few years, he gradually began raising rates. His planning techniques became more sophisticated and he started working with a higher-net-worth clientele.

Mark Zaifman, Founder, Spiritus Financial Planning



How he caught our eye: Takes a holistic approach to financial planning derived from principles in *Your Money or Your Life*.

Career path: Earned a bachelor's degree in tax accounting from Monmouth University in 1983. He left a career in accounting to become a partner in New Jersey-based executive search firm Management Recruiters of Bridgewater, which focused on filling chief financial officer and tax director roles at Fortune 500 firms. He sold his partnership shortly before getting married in 1992 and then moved to the San Francisco Bay area. Over the next 10 years, he held recruiting

roles at firms such as Fair Isaac and Texas Instruments. He launched Spiritus Financial Planning in 2003.

Personal: Married to Patricia Chiappa for 21 years. Both are outdoor enthusiasts who enjoy hiking, kayaking, and skiing. They also spend time organic gardening.

Favorite Funds: Vanguard Total Stock Market ETF VTI, PowerShares FTSE RAFI US 1500 Small-Mid PRFZ, Schwab Fundamental Emerging Markets Large Company Index Fund SFENX, PIMCO Unconstrained Bond Fund PFIUX.

He continued doing seminars and speaking events in those early years, getting himself in front of as many potential clients as possible. In 2008, Robin, who had become a friend, asked Zaifman to contribute to a revised edition of *Your Money or Your Life*. A West Coast book tour introduced him to more people who were interested in his planning services.

About 70% of his clients are women. "At first that was surprising, but if I step back and think about it, women generally have an easier time sharing their feelings," he says. "Men

tend to be a little more buttoned up, and it's a little more challenging to talk about money beyond the investment return."

Another significant client base consists of doctors and dentists. Zaifman built those relationships in his early days in the Bay Area, when he did a brief stint as a medical practice-management consultant. These clients were the reason Zaifman began managing assets three years ago. As some of the doctors and dentists began selling their practices, they asked Zaifman to manage their money. He

had not wanted the responsibility of managing clients' assets and had walked them through a do-it-yourself model using Vanguard accounts.

"After resisting assets under management for seven years, now I'm absolutely nuts for it," he says.

He uses Schwab's institutional platform and adheres to the investment philosophy pioneered by Vanguard founder John Bogle. Spiritus has about \$17 million under management. Zaifman's objective is to reach \$50 million.

Growth Opportunities

Zaifman has resisted using traditional methods to grow Spiritus, such as advertising and cold calling. However, he and wife Patricia have embraced online marketing as a way to reach new clients. Zaifman is active on Twitter, Facebook, and Pinterest.

"I'm trying to find people who are interested in a more sophisticated relationship with a financial planner, but want a soulful approach," he says. The marketing efforts "are all coordinated to give people the idea of who they are going to talk to when they have a complimentary consultation. By being authentic and talking values and money and life planning, I'm getting the right people to reach out."

These days, Zaifman particularly enjoys the retirement-planning aspect of his practice.

"There are so many baby boomers who have done really well, who learned how to save and have their financial houses in order," he says. "I really love not only helping them get to that stage of financial independence, but realizing the value when they are retired of having someone manage their income strategy, and to be their co-pilot through the transitions of retirement and a long life." ■

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