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THE GEORGIA SOCIETY OF CPAs

*Meet Your New
GSCPA Chair:*
**James W.
Freeman, CPA**



**The Georgia Society
of CPAs**

July/August 2019 | Volume IX, Issue 4

The 20/20 Vision

James Freeman, CPA



"If you tell people where to go but not how to get there, you'll be amazed at the results." – George S. Patton

"Dream no small dreams for they have no power to move the hearts of men." – Goethe

First off, thank you. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to serve GSCPA as chair for the next 12 months. It is not a commitment I take lightly. I am excited and energized at the year ahead and hope to continue the great efforts of my predecessors. The Chair Message to me is essentially an open forum. Many readers may gloss over it, but I would like to provide you, my peers, with some inspiration from what I consider to be great minds. If any of these moves you in a positive direction, then I welcome a note from you letting me know. As we transition from 2019 to 2020, I would be amiss if I did not play up the 20/20 theme of focusing on a clear vision. As chair, some overarching themes I hope to focus on include 1) integrity for our profession, 2) membership engagement, and 3) effective communication. When taken together, these three elements can be transformative. I will expand upon each one of these in the next three issues to come and then apply them to some genuine and meaningful concerns that continue to face each one of us: balancing work and family time as well as looking ahead to what it means to be a CPA.

So, the quotes; this is likely the only time you will get two quotes in the same message. The Goethe quote is on a

card that I keep on my desk to remind me to dream big, not only to stir something inside myself but in others as well. That does not come without failure, but it reminds me to try. The quote from Patton is appropriate for my first message as chair. It comes from a great leader, and if you think about the advice, it provides both wisdom and comfort – wisdom in the understanding that people will take different paths and comfort in trusting the people around you who are all heading for the common goal. This is the environment we have today at GSCPA as I see it and hope to continue having down the road.

It has been an eventful summer so far. GSCPA's Spring Council Meeting in Savannah was well attended and included a lively and thoughtful debate on our bylaws changes and updates. Ultimately, we now have a modernized set of bylaws that should be a meaningful platform for the next decade. The AICPA Spring Council meeting in Washington, D.C. allowed our Georgia delegates to interact with our peers throughout the country and get some face time with our U.S. congressmen. The Member Summits in Albany, Columbus, Savannah, Augusta, Athens, and Atlanta were very well received throughout the state. We look forward to refining and continuing this program. With Annual Convention in Charleston now behind us, we can look forward to a few months of summer recess and strategic planning for our businesses and the Society. Again, I humbly thank you for allowing me to serve in this manner and am excited about what lies ahead.



Meet Your New
GSCPA Chair:
**JAMES W.
FREEMAN, CPA**

Natalie Rooney

James Freeman, CPA, almost wasn't a CPA at all. Growing up in Lexington, Kentucky, he thought he had his career path all figured out. First, James would attend his dream school and his grandfather's alma mater – the University of North Carolina. Then, he would follow in his mother's footsteps and go to dental school, specializing in oral and maxillofacial surgery.

While he did graduate from UNC, the dentistry part didn't pan out quite as he had planned. After years in the dental field, his mom had observed that no one teaches doctors how to operate their businesses. She made Freeman promise to take some business courses so he would have a fundamental understanding of how to run the business side of a dental practice. He agreed and began taking the first-year business "weed out" courses, discovering he had a surprising affinity for business.

"Other people were complaining about how hard the classes were," Freeman says. "To me, it was beyond logical and easy. Go and sit in a five-hour physics lab or organic chemistry if you wanted hard!" He credits the professors who made learning the material fun and applicable. "At the end, I didn't know if I wanted to stop studying business."

Ultimately, Freeman changed course and after earning a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology and Chemistry, he received a Master of Accounting from UNC-Chapel Hill's Kenan-Flagler Business School. His summer before the MAC program was free because he had already completed all of the entry-level courses, so he accepted an internship at Arthur Andersen in Atlanta and after graduation, accepted a full-time position in Andersen's State and Local Tax Division.

Going Global

Soon, Freeman's adventurous nature had him looking further afield. "I wanted to do something more and expand on an international level," he says. He made his first trip to Europe to interview with Marcia Doyle, one of Andersen's few female partners at that time. "She wanted me to come over for a three-year expatriate assignment," Freeman says. So, at the end of 2000, he packed up his life and moved to Brussels, Belgium without any ability to speak French or Flemish.

For those three years, Freeman worked hard and played hard, traveling all over Europe, meeting with clients, and gaining incredible experience. However, after 9/11, Andersen's demise, and transitioning to Deloitte, he decided what he wanted to do was take his public accounting experience and put it to work in private industry. He returned to the U.S. after completing his three-year commitment and began working for Ashland/Valvoline, where he was the only one in the tax department with international experience.

Freeman decided to pursue his MBA at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business while simultaneously working at Valvoline. The company wanted him to return to Europe and turn-around the business in Germany. "It was a tremendous opportunity for someone so young," Freeman said. He leaped at the opportunity, once again moved back to Europe, and was immediately thrust into the world of managing people, sales, marketing, and operations – all in a different language. James found managing the team fun and productive. He was able to double Valvoline's business during his time there.

But time zones were taking their toll. Freeman's wife, Jessi, wanted to start a family and be in the same time zone as her mother. The timing was somewhat fortuitous. In planning their return to the U.S., Freeman considered his business opportunities and reached out to Ricky Novak, with whom he had interned and worked at Andersen all those years ago. The two had stayed in touch and maintained a strong friendship. Maybe it was time to start a firm of their own. Freeman repatriated and launched The Strategic Group with Novak.

Being Boutique

The Strategic Group is a boutique investment firm that focuses primarily on investment strategies that also provide tax benefits as a source of returns. The company's primary lines of business currently include investment management, opportunity zones, conservation, 1031 qualified intermediary, and federal and state tax credits.

"I like being boutique and having fewer than twenty-five employees because it allows us to be flexible, move quickly, and timely adapt to changes," Freeman says of the firm.

Freeman, continued on page 10



Novak had run Deloitte's 1031 practice for the southeast. "We were initially trying to service that clientele," Freeman says. "We hold onto exchange funds when a client sells their real estate. When they want to buy, we provide those funds, in accordance with the 1031 rules so they don't have to recognize a taxable gain."

In 2008, as transactional real estate was drying up, abuses in the 1031 industry came to light. "You'd find groups that would invest clients' money in illiquid investments, or just plain steal the funds and to add insult to injury, the clients lost their money and still had to pay tax on their gain as they were unable to successfully complete it with no money to purchase replacement property," Freeman says. "We looked at that and knew we could make a difference. We could develop best practices to address the lack of regulation in this industry for qualified intermediaries."

The industry remains fairly unregulated to this day, but in 2009, Freeman's moral and ethical character was recognized with the GSCPA's Outstanding Member in Industry Award primarily for developing best practices and educating others on what CPAs need to look out for when their clients do a 1031 exchange.

"We were able to have a seat at the table as trusted advisors in a niche area," Freeman says.

The CPA Community

Someone once told Freeman that if the world came to an end, as a CPA, he could always rely on himself and hang a shingle. That security element and always being able to fundamentally bet on yourself was appealing. But he also loves that there is a language spoken amongst CPAs throughout the country. "I love being a CPA and meeting people across Georgia and the U.S. who I can talk with about common themes and goals, whether that's numbers, tax returns, audits, or anything else in the financial world of which we all share a love. For me, sitting down with financials or projections or even a 10k, and being able to analyze those numbers, tells a story for those who can interpret it and determine the best way to digest it. Being a CPA allows you to do that on a level that others typically find difficult."

He admits he goes against the grain sometimes with his personality. "I like to mix it up. It leads to productive conversations and healthy brainstorming. I do not like group-think."

The Strategic Group may one day be a family business. Wheeler, now 8, wants to be a baseball or basketball player. If neither of those pans out, he plans to work for the Strategic Group. And if that doesn't work out, he's going to play football. Ultimately, Freeman believes that his son will be a professional sports coach due to his analytical skills, strategic thinking and passion for all sports.

Freeman's daughters, Mackenzie (3) and Lucy Tate (8 months), haven't indicated their professional plans yet. They both have very strong personalities and it is a joy to be their father and part of their development.

"We try to be a family-first business," Freeman says. He designs his days around the kids' schedules, making time for reading and carpool. "That time in the car is the highlight of my day," he says. He heads out for 4 a.m. runs, which offer him moments of mindfulness. "It's amazing what will pop into your head once it's emptied." Then it's back to the house to make breakfast, get the kids up and tackle the day.

In early 2016, the Freemans began renovating a 100-year old home in downtown Atlanta. Their goal was to be as green, sustainable and socially responsible as possible. Solar panels on the roof charge the Tesla battery packs, which provide current and back-up power, they installed a geothermal system through the granite below the house and installed low e lights and wiring throughout the "smart" house. Their goal was to turn back time and restore the home to its 1920s glory with all the modern sophistication of today's technology.

The Road Ahead

As Freeman steps into his new role as GSCPA chair, he knows the year ahead holds many challenging issues. He says the toughest one to address may be at the heart of what it means to



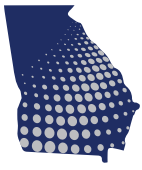
be a CPA. "When you look at the traditional boxes such as tax and audit, the profession doesn't fit only into those anymore. We need to have conversations about what it means to be a CPA. We can continue to play a role in the larger investment and financial services and advisory function and be a value-added resource for our clients, or we can get left behind. We don't want that."

Member engagement and member value are also high on Freeman's priority list. He hopes those issues become part of a long-term series of discussions and focus.

Freeman hopes to continue to make progress on the legislative front, as well. And he says better communication, not only with CPAs in other states, but also other professionals such as attorneys and wealth advisors can only be a good thing. "It's the backyard BBQ theory," he says. "If all of your advisors aren't actively communicating with each other, you're not best served because you can't effectively consult with a client without knowing all of the moving parts. You can't do that in a vacuum. It goes back to that member engagement – both internally and externally – and continuing the mission of my peers before me. I'm excited to be in this role and look forward to adding value to the GSCPA in a meaningful way."



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