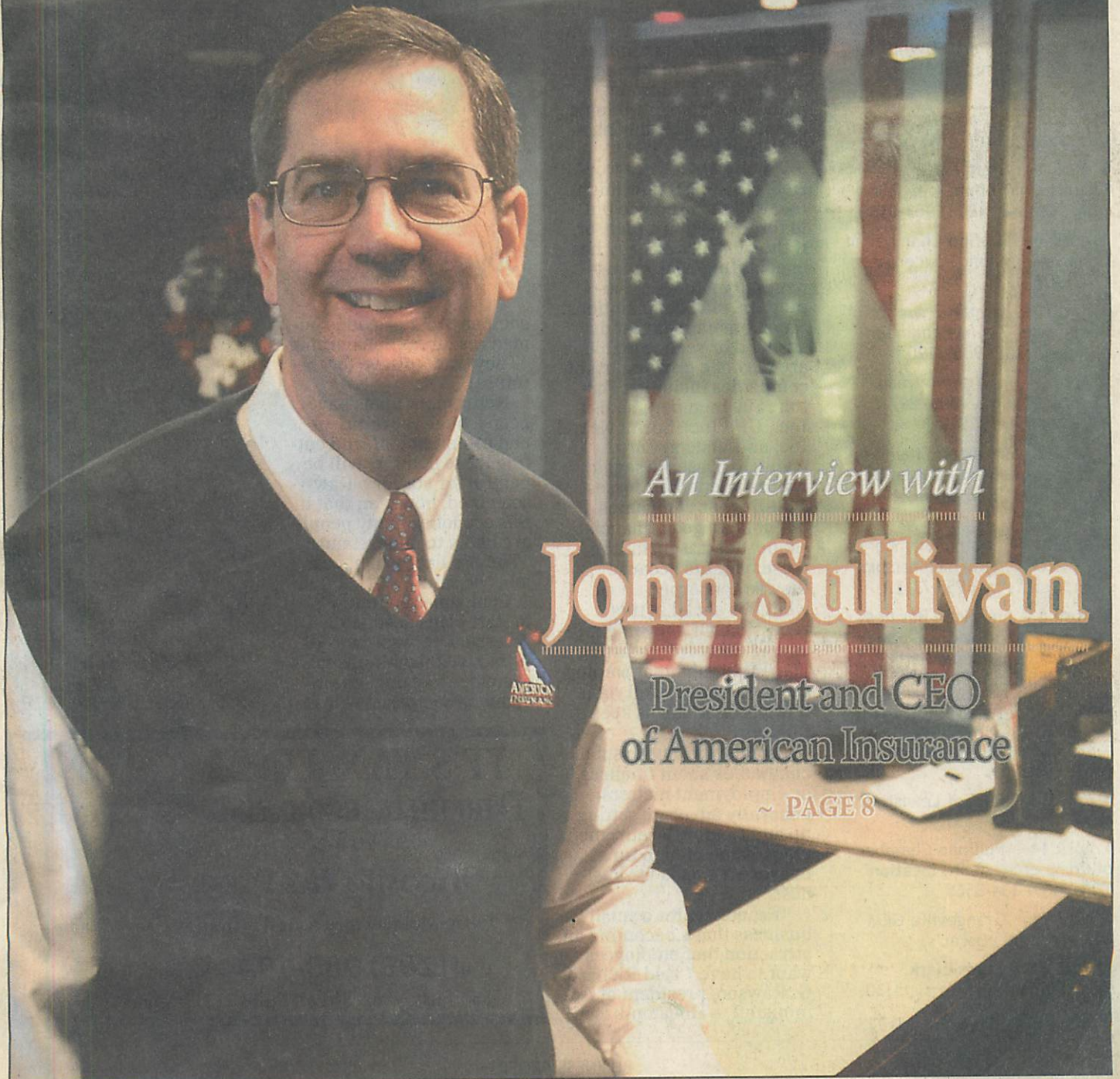


Business Profile

A MONTHLY PUBLICATION OF THE LEWISTON TRIBUNE ■ MARCH 17, 2009

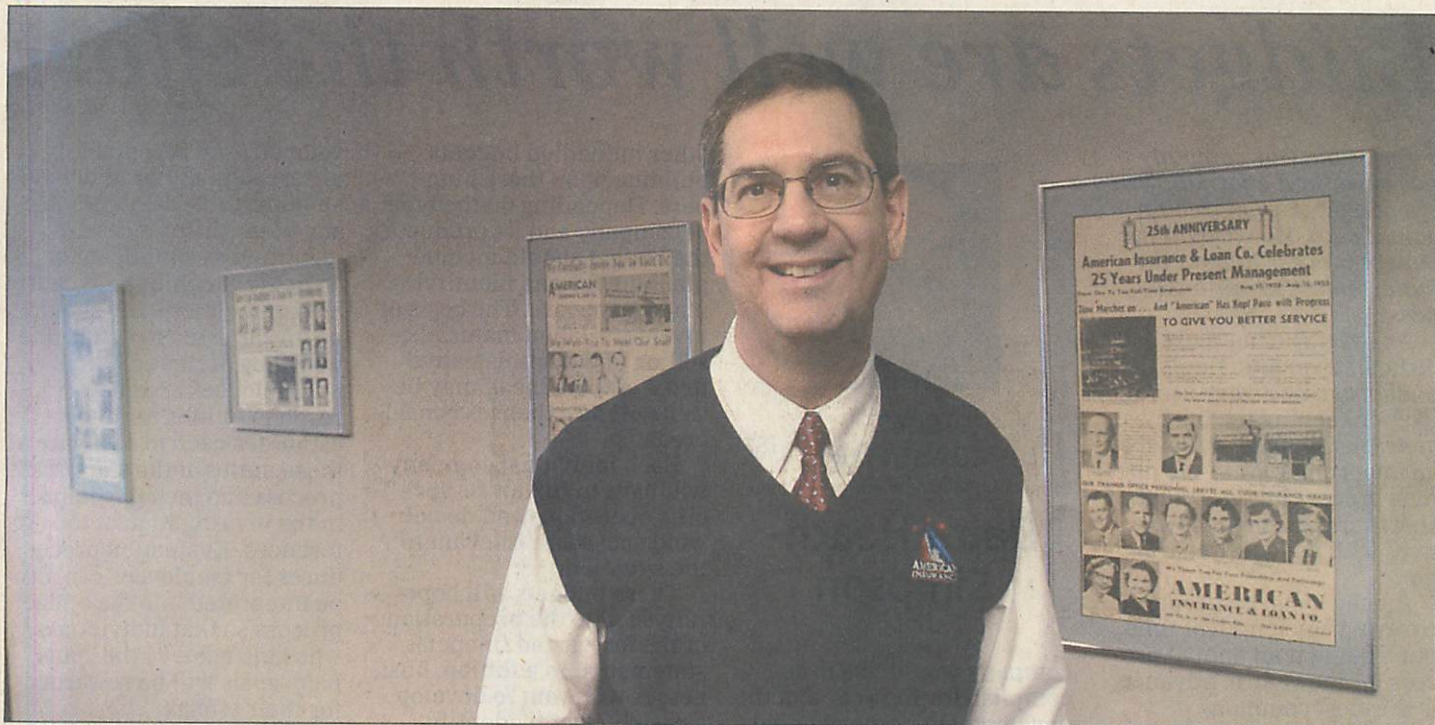


An Interview with

John Sullivan

President and CEO
of American Insurance

~ PAGE 8



John Sullivan's great uncle bought what was to become American Insurance in 1928. Sullivan's sons are now the fourth generation to work for the family business.

Tribune/Kyle Mills

Independent to the core

American Insurance president John Sullivan says his company is all about offering choices

By MARY TATKO
OF TARGET PUBLICATIONS

American Insurance's patriotic name and logo are no gimmick to the agency's president and CEO, John Sullivan.

The business was so named because it began in the American Bank and Trust Co. Building in downtown Lewiston (where Wells Fargo bank now does business), but the name's significance doesn't end there.

"We definitely have a patriotic bent," Sullivan said. "It colors the expression of the

business."

Indeed, building on patriotic themes has been a natural for the insurance business, he said.

His great uncle Harry Christy, who purchased the business in 1928 when it also handled real estate loans, was a World War I veteran and always patriotic, Sullivan said. "When he made a loan to you, you'd find yourself joining the American Legion."

Sullivan's father, Frank (Sully) Sullivan, served in World War II, Korea and in the Idaho National Guard. "That's that greatest generation they

talk about," Sullivan said.

For his part, Sullivan is fascinated by how a person's — or business' — future is shaped by what happened years or generations before.

"I'm kind of a history buff," he said. "It means something to me."

The business' logo, a stylized Statue of Liberty in red, white and blue, was designed locally and at Sullivan's behest is dotted by fireworks, inspired both by the nation's 200th anniversary celebration and the local Fourth of July fireworks display American Insurance sponsors.

The independence and liberty of which the statue is a symbol also represent the "underpinnings of an independent insurance agency," he said. "We provide choice."

Finding His Voice

Customers who reach American Insurance's voice mail are greeted by Sullivan's own recorded message. He said he's been told "You have a good voice — you should go

SEE INDEPENDENT, PAGE 9

INDEPENDENT

From page 8

into radio.”

To which he replies he’s already done so.

At age 15, Sullivan took to the airwaves for KLER radio in Orofino, where he attended high school until his senior year. He got a lot of grief from his friends, he said, but stuck with the job, a radio show for teens.

Later, while a student at Lewis-Clark State College, he worked as a DJ for KOZE, then was offered the opportunity to be manager at KORT, the station’s affiliate in Grangeville.

But Sullivan thought he’d come to the end of the road in radio. He’d always assumed he’d go into insurance, like his father, so before taking the station manager job, he called his old man.

“Dad said ‘No.’”

It took “courage and wisdom,” Sullivan said, for his dad to know he wasn’t ready to join the family business yet, though he admits it wasn’t easy to hear at the time.

He took the radio job, where he learned the ins and outs of advertising sales and management. Three years later, in 1977, Sullivan was surprised to get a call from his father, offering him a job.

Nothing Taken For Granted

Sullivan jokes that it would be wrong to say he started his insurance career on the ground floor, since he literally started below that, in the basement. The agency’s office was full, so he was relegated to the space below, accessed by a narrow wooden staircase he had to duck his head to descend.

It was this unceremoni-



John Sullivan, owner of American Insurance, talks about the history of the family business.

Tribune/Kyle Mills

ous induction into the family business that gave him a lifelong appreciation for his opportunities, Sullivan said.

“It’s kept me, I hope people think, humble.”

He said he learned from his father, a successful businessman, World War II veteran and former POW (Frank Sullivan retired as a Lieutenant Colonel), not to take anything for granted. It’s a lesson he strives to pass along to his sons Shawn and Philip, who represent the fourth genera-

tion of the family business.

“I tell them ‘It’ll go another generation — if you work hard,’” Sullivan said, emphasizing the last four words. “No business has a fundamental right to exist.”

He’s proud to have another generation of his family in the business, but said it wasn’t a given that his sons would work there.

Shawn, who has been with the agency 15 years and currently is a vice president, graduated from the Univer-

John B. Sullivan

Age: 55

Occupation: President, CEO and agent of American Insurance Agency

Residence: Lewiston

Education/professional training: Lewiston High School Graduate 1971; three years college, including 1974 student body president, at Lewis-Clark State College. Licensed insurance agent for property, casualty, life and health; surplus lines agent; LUTC Fellow conferred by the National Association of Life Underwriters; and Certified Insurance Counselor conferred by the National Alliance

Family: wife Pamela; six grown children by previous marriage: Shawn, Michelle, Philip, Krista, Levi and Adam; two grown step-children: Jaaron Nunn, Troutdale, Ore., and Chauncey Galloway, Coeur d’Alene; four grandchildren

Civic/professional activities: 24-year involvement as past president and current vice president of Community Spirit, non-profit organization that sponsors valley’s Independence Day fireworks; current president, Independent Insurance Agents of Lewiston; past president, Lewis Clark Life Underwriters Association.; past board member, Valley Boys and Girls Clubs; past senior commander, Royal Ranger Scouting Group 36

sity of Idaho with a degree in microbiology.

SEE INDEPENDENT, PAGE 12

INDEPENDENT

From page 9

"He came out of school, and I was needing to hire," Sullivan said. "In passing, I told him about the job."

"I personally tested him for insurance, and he flunked," he continued. "I took a chance on him anyway, and it's a chance I'm glad I took. He's the best agent I've ever seen. He's a natural."

Focus on Service

The agency's current home was completed in April 2004, 76 years after Harry Christy bought the business. The event is commemorated by a plaque dedicating the building to Sullivan's father. A nearby flagpole is dedicated to Christy.

Sullivan's wife, Pamela, was the "guiding force" for decorating the interior of the brick-faced building on Lewiston's Southway Avenue, overlooking the Snake River. It is ornamented within by pieces of Americana, from a portrait of George Washington to a classic roll-top desk in Sullivan's office.

Also prominent are framed newspaper advertisements representing various milestones in the agency's history.

Having survived the Great Depression and all the ups and downs since then, his business is well-positioned to thrive in tough times, Sullivan said.

In any economic climate, the agency's focus is serving its established client base, work he estimates makes up 80 percent of the business.

During a recession, this number only rises.

"We're doing everything possible to help them afford their insurance," Sullivan

American Insurance and Loan Co., Inc., DBA American Insurance Agency

Locations: 55 Southway Ave, Lewiston (main office); 203 E Third St., Moscow (branch office)

Employees: 17 full time employees; 14 in Lewiston, three in Moscow

Products/services: full-service, independent insurance agency selling all lines of insurance in Idaho, Washington, Oregon and Montana, representing dozens of national and regional insurance companies for sales and service of policies including auto, home, business, farm, bonds, workers compensation, public entity

said of the agency's customers.

That can mean re-evaluating a client's policy to see if coverage can be modified to make it more affordable since sometimes the client's needs change or better rates become available among the companies the agency represents.

One thing Sullivan hopes people won't do is turn to companies advertising "direct" insurance that "cuts out the middle man."

Whereas new sales are a small part of doing business for his agency, he said, direct marketers who woo customers with omnipresent television, radio, online and mail advertisements spend a billion dollars year on advertising.

When the focus is on attracting customers, not serving those customers, the results can be disappointing, even disastrous, Sullivan said.

"Really insurance is a ser-

vice business, not a retail business," he said. "Trying to make it a retail product, like shoes, is disingenuous."

The irony, he said, is despite the direct marketers' claims of huge savings, a local, independent company like his almost always can beat their prices in addition to offering personalized service that ensures clients receive the coverage they need.

According to Sullivan, having the wrong insurance can be as bad as not having any, a risk customers run when they go it alone. "They'll make mistakes," he said. "When you serve as your own agent, you're risking everything."

Ultimately, he said, insurance is just a promise. "How you deliver that promise is what you're buying."

There's another reason to resist the overtures of national companies with no local agents, Sullivan said: "You really need to do business lo-

caly."

John B. Sullivan (1977 - current). John's sons, Shawn and Philip Sullivan, now make up the fourth generation of family involved in the business. From 1927 until 2004, the agency operated from offices at 108 Ninth St. (the current Wells Fargo Bank building) in downtown Lewiston. The agency moved into its current location, at 55 Southway Ave., on April 15, 2004.

Exactly one year later, American Insurance purchased Remington Insurance Agency and now maintains a Moscow branch office. In June 2008, the agency purchased the RE Magnuson Agency of Kendrick, absorbing the service of those policyholders into the current offices.

He cites his agency's support for the valley's Fourth of July fireworks display as just one example of how local businesses contribute to the quality of life in a community.

"If you cut us off at the pockets, that quality of life is going away," he said. "You're cutting your community's throat."

Centennial Swan Song

Being so conscious of history, Sullivan has his eye on the business's 100th anniversary in 2022. The event will be his swan song, he said, though he doesn't foresee ever leaving the agency entirely.

"I'm all business. I eat, sleep and breathe insurance," he said. "I don't believe I'll ever fully retire."

