

GIVING BACK PAYING IT FORWARD

BY JEANNIE MACDONALD

Sometimes, the most pivotal lessons in life aren't taught by teachers. They're taught by people who see something in us that we don't see in ourselves. Just ask Sherri Stephens. Growing up in Davison, she planned to follow in her parents' footsteps by majoring in education at college. But a high school internship for Flint wealth manager, John Winton, of Raymond James set her on a path to become one of America's top financial advisors.

Winton encouraged Stephens to take economics classes at the University of Michigan-Flint. She found the subject fascinating and decided to pursue a business degree. Like many others, Stephens benefited from Winton's knack for nurturing talent, recalling, "Countless men and women have told me, 'I spent an hour with John and it changed the trajectory of my life.' John did that for clients, colleagues and even people he didn't know. He taught me how rewarding it is to mentor others, and how to use my financial aptitude to benefit the community."

The community-engagement component Winton modeled has inspired Stephens to work with some of Flint's leading charitable organizations. She's a trustee and chair of the investment committee for the Community Foundation of Greater Flint (CFGF), which Stephens calls "one of my absolute core passions. Flint has been battered for decades, from the GM plant closures and eventual bankruptcy that caused economic devastation, to the 2008 global recession."

Then, the water crisis struck. Working with the Community Foundation of Greater Flint and other public/private entities, Stephens quickly realized, "This is about more than water. It's about education, creating opportunity and restoring hope. People can't work unless they can read, write and use computers. Parents and kids need healthy food and health care to succeed and recover.

Funding programs for those initiatives has become one area of CFGF's primary focus."

Nationally, as co-founder and vice president of the Women's Leadership Alliance, Stephens brings her visionary skills to a group formed to support and expand the financial advisory profession for women. Locally, she underscores that commitment at UM-Flint, where she's literally putting her money where her mouth is by creating the Sherri Stephens Advancement in Wealth Management Scholarship. She is on an advisory board to the Business School of Management there.

Stephens' nonprofit service often illuminates issues relevant to her practice. For instance, joining the board of McLaren Flint has given Stephens a perspective on the complexities of health care costs – strategic insights she can offer clients when estimating medical expenses in retirement. Yet, Stephens believes, "Retirement planning isn't just amassing money. It's about transferring your values. That's the more important conversation families need to have."

Throughout her 40-year career, Stephens' expertise has had a lasting impact, helping people achieve their most cherished goals – both financial and personal – while also preparing them for the unexpected speed bumps on the road of life. In many ways, this would-be education major became a teacher after all: tutoring clients on how to manage their money through life's stages.

Stephens' success has earned her numerous awards from prestigious business publications like *Forbes*, *Barron's* and *Financial Times*. Headquartered in Flint, with satellite offices in Tampa and Dexter (Pearl Planning), Stephens Wealth Management Group handles more than half a billion in assets. Not surprisingly, the practice's 14-person team follows Stephens' lead by donating their time and talents to local causes that will help Flint thrive, now and in the future. It's a legacy Stephens – and her late mentor, John Winton – can be proud of. ■

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