

By Tom Schuman

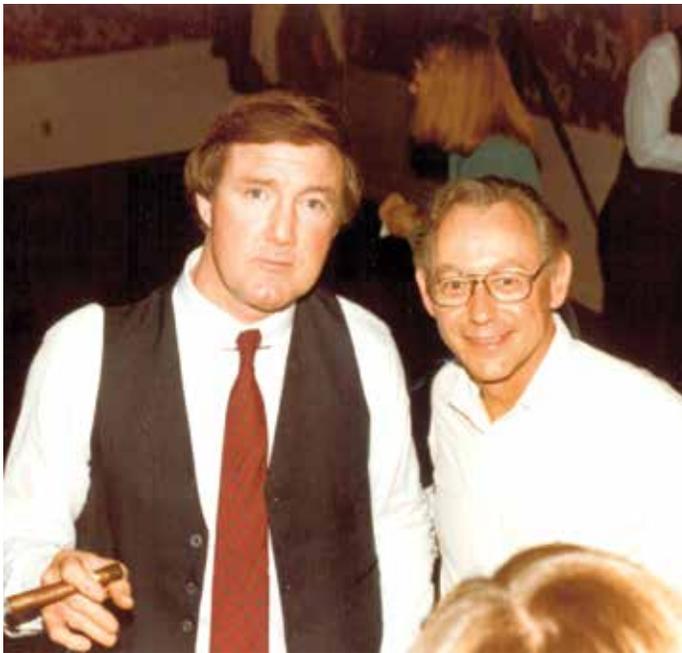
# DOUBLE THE PLEASURE

## MJ Also Celebrates 50 Years of Success

When several team members at MJ Insurance were asked to describe the founder of their business, Michael M. Bill, they offered:

“He’s of that greatest generation ... still brings that competitive spirit to the office.”

“He’s just a very passionate guy, very driven, competitive. You still see and hear that drive that he has.”



Michael M. Bill, left, with Tom Barnes at a company Christmas party in the late 1970s. Barnes was one of the first employees of MJ Insurance and became a shareholder upon the retirement of original co-owner Jim Ritter. Bill grew up seeing his father, an attorney, work with a number of major insurance carriers.

It was clear they were right on target from a telephone conversation with the 78-year-old Bill, who co-founded the company 50 years ago. He was a high school rival of Jim Brown, one of the greatest running backs in National Football League history, and they were college teammates at Syracuse University.

“I always thought that I wanted to play with the best or against the best. When I was 27, I had the opportunity to buy (real estate agency) F.C. Tucker’s insurance division. That really became the beginning of MJ,” Bill recalls.

“I felt as we put money back in the business and we hired the right people, I really wanted to be the No. 1 insurance agent in the city of Indianapolis, then the state of Indiana. I was never really satisfied where we were; we needed to get better. Almost like an athletic coach – satisfied, know you’re doing well but want to get better. That’s been my attitude my whole life.”

Bill played linebacker and center at Syracuse. Brown, in addition to his halfback heroics, was Bill’s running mate at linebacker in the days of two-way players.

“What I liked about being center (is that) you were like the offensive coordinator. We had sophisticated blocking schemes, and you had to execute that with 40,000, 50,000 people screaming at you. After that, I felt very comfortable in taking to the business world.”

Bill characterizes himself as “still pretty active, still involved in some of the accounts I developed over the years.”

And it’s been quite a ride. MJ Insurance celebrates its 50th anniversary in June and its sixth year of being ranked as one of the Best Places to Work in Indiana.

### Winning formula

Michael H. Bill joined the company in 1992, was named president in 2001 and became CEO in 2006. The decision to follow in his father’s footsteps was not a difficult one.

“So much of it was the culture of MJ. I got to spend a lot of time around the people at MJ at different events, social activities. I got to know so many of those people when I was young and some are still with our organization today, which is really neat.”

After working for CNA Insurance Companies, the younger Bill quickly realized that corporate America was not for him. He “came home” to MJ.

“It was a great opportunity for me to work and learn from my dad. I didn’t report to him directly at first, but he and I had an upfront contract with each other. Business is business and family is family. We run MJ like a business. It works really well that way. We never have had any type of major disagreement, although there is healthy debate on some issues.”

Two of the key factors for success over the years: financial discipline and investing in people.

“We never had any bank debt,” Michael M. Bill confirms. “All acquisitions were done out of working capital or net worth. We remained very independent and Michael has embraced that.”

“What differentiates us?” he continues. “The CEO of MJ to this day has monthly meetings on accounts receivables. I started that when I was 27. You won’t see that in many companies. We never outgrew our resources. We always had capacity to grow and that meant hiring new people.”

Michael H. Bill relates that the biggest change has been going from a transactional organization to one that is much more consultative. That includes understanding what clients want beyond just their insurance needs. As a result, investments in training and development have increased, and will continue to do so.

MJ has clients in every state and 16 different countries. It has posted a profit in each of its 50 years. Of the now approximately 130 employees, a third (43) have been with the company more than a decade. Fourteen have been part of the team at least 20 years and 10 have 30-plus years of experience.

“We spend a lot of time in the hiring process. We make sure we’ve got a good strong cultural strategic fit,” Michael H. Bill notes. “As our people grow and develop technically, that’s not all we want from them. We want them to develop as leaders. If hiring someone for an advisory or consultancy role, a quick hire would probably be three months. We might talk to somebody more on average four to six months, even up to a year.”

### Talented team

President and chief operating officer Jon Loftin fits that description. He was finishing his master’s in business administration with the intention of leaving the insurance business when a new position opened at MJ. Over a period of six months, he met with all the company leaders and says, “The more I talked, the more I was saying this is exactly why I got my MBA, to be in more of an entrepreneurial spot.”

In the insurance world, Loftin notes there is always an opportunity to move to another broker, carrier or other entity in search of that extra dollar.

“It’s an industry that’s always hiring. We had a recent situation in which someone left and was gone just over a year,” he explains, “before they came back and said, ‘You know what, I’m here forever. The grass is not always greener on the other side. I miss the culture.’ Others have said the biggest mistake they ever made is leaving MJ.”

The investment in people is summarized by the company purpose of “inspiring success, fulfillment and well-being” of each person it serves. That starts with employees and families, and extends to business partners, clients and the community.

MJ University offers resources and guidance to help individuals thrive. In the past year, the effort has been extended to encourage all team members to chart their life plan.

“It’s working in order to live, not living in order to work. That mindset is readily apparent here,” Loftin confirms.

Specific company initiatives that help grow that company culture include offering 15 hours of volunteer service time for associates to use in giving back to the community, recognizing all employee anniversaries, giving special “making a difference” awards and empowering a Culture Committee to plan and execute various activities throughout the year.



Team members at MJ Insurance specialize in a variety of service lines including construction, energy, transportation, real estate, manufacturing, sororities and mining. A number of awards have been earned for their business and community efforts.

### Individual players

Joe Perkins, a partner in employee benefits, is celebrating 30 years with MJ – his second job out of college. While he senses other companies are focused on writing more business and making more money, he's seen MJ maintain that family atmosphere despite its growth and become even more of a purpose-driven organization.

"It's 'what's your why? – what really drives you?' One of the things I've gotten tremendous gratification from is I really enjoy the coaching aspect of the business," he confides, adding that he had an excellent mentor when he started. "I've done mentoring with three or four younger producers, and that's really what my passion is. I don't know if I would have found that if we hadn't taken the time to ask 'what's your why.'"

Sarah Hanson, a claims coordinator in the commercial lines department, has five years with the company. She uses her company-allotted volunteer time (and more) at the Dayspring Center (providing assistance to homeless families) in downtown Indianapolis, knowing that her team is there to support her. In addition to helping plan activities as current chair of the Culture Committee, she has taken advantage of the resource library, lunch and learn sessions, wellness activities and more.

"I've actually had employees come to me and say this is life changing. They wish they could have done this in their 20s and 30s," she discloses. "It's setting down a path of personal development – finding your purpose in life, what legacy you want to leave for yourself. I've seen a change in numerous people here, wanting to live that purpose and not just go day-to-day with the grind."

### Planning the next round

While MJ will take time to celebrate its 50 years of achievement, all eyes are also looking forward.

Michael H. Bill contends that by being closely held and professionally managed but with a diverse ownership (bringing in other key principals), "We're playing for the long term. We're a generation two company now, probably in the third inning of generation two. We're going to ensure that we will be a generation three company."

The two Bills started talking in 1994 and came up with a formal succession plan two years later.

Michael M. Bill puts it bluntly: "If you ask what my greatest professional accomplishment is, it was transferring from generation number one to generation number two without any debt whatsoever and a strong balance sheet. That is why MJ made the successful transition and that same (plan) is in place today to go to generation three."

The team is on board. Loftin recognizes the significance of the 50-year mark and the ranking as a top 80 broker in the country, but offers, "We're looking forward to the next 50 years."

Hanson, when asked if she was surprised at all by the longevity of her colleagues, responded: "Not at all. I think we have the best people. I'm so excited to come to work every day because I get to work with really intelligent people. Not only do I get to work with them, but I get to learn from them. I'm hoping I can stay here and celebrate our 75th anniversary."