

Q&A

WITH ED HARRINGTON

In summarizing his conversation with **Ed Harrington**, GFOA's **Timothy Martin** said this is a life someone should make a movie about. He wasn't exaggerating. Ed talked about his early life, becoming an accountant, almost losing his life over it, his fascinating career with the City of San Francisco, and even the Tao of Ed ("If you are ready for the next thing, the next thing shows up").



This article was adapted from GFOA's FINE(ance) Fridays podcast. The full recording of the interview is available at gfoa.org/finance-fridays.

You grew up in San Francisco, and you were the youngest of five children. I think it's fair to say that you faced some real tragedy, having your father die when you were nine and your mother die when you were 13. Can you tell us a little about your early life?

I grew up in my brother's house, and I don't remember a lot about childhood. I think when those things happen, it sets you back a bit. I do remember some good things. I remember my mother teaching us that no one is better than you, and you are no better than anybody else. And that has served me well throughout my life. When I run into people who are very difficult and think they're very important, it doesn't bother me as much because I know that they're not any better than I am.

Is that where you got your confidence?

I think there's something that comes out of loss—you can say, I may as well give it a try. What do I have to lose? And very few things can't be fixed. You can make all kinds of mistakes and learn from them, and you can fix them. If you're always afraid of not being able to do something, then nothing happens. So, I guess the fear factor was low.

You've mentioned that working at KPMG was like going to college for the second time. This was a very large accounting firm. What was your mindset when you went there?

If I was going to be in finance, I should get a CPA license; and to get a CPA license, I needed to work for an accounting firm. And if I was going to work for an accounting firm, it would

make more sense to work for a big one and get a lot of experience. It was like getting a master's degree, frankly. I interviewed with a variety of firms, and I asked them questions. I asked every firm how many women and how many people of color they had as partners—because I'm gay and I didn't want to work for a company with Neanderthal views. I wanted to work for someplace where I could be accepted and be a real person and grow. KPMG was much better about all of that than the other companies I talked to.

A lot of people might not be comfortable asking questions like that.

I was comfortable enough to say, "Hey, is this someplace I want to work? It's not just your choice." And I've always kept that in mind when I've interviewed people. I've been surprised how sometimes people interview folks as if they're the only decision-makers in the room. The person applying for the job has a choice to make, too.

You were still in your 20s at this point, and you'd been given a lot of management responsibility. Did you ever get the feeling people might be looking at you and wondering how this guy got this job?

I've actually had people ask me that. But I had an IT background. I had been doing IT consulting when I was in school.

I passed the CPA exam, by the way, so they put me in charge of clients I never would have gotten if I were 22 and coming in for my first job after college. And one of the most fun ones was the Asia Foundation. They sent me traveling in Asia every year to go to all the foundation offices, which I thought was great.

Those trips to Asia weren't always easy, were they?

Traveling through Southeast Asia was incredibly good. I could meet people and be in their homes or have lunch with them.

On one trip I was in Bangladesh, and I was supposed to go to Sri Lanka next. We started hearing about riots in Colombo (the economic center of Sri Lanka)—there's been a 500-year war between different factions in Sri Lanka—so we ended up not being able to get there right away. We got kicked off the plane in India and spent a few days there.

I called and asked if I should be going, since it seemed a little dangerous. What they didn't know was that the American Express office had been bombed and shut down. I ended up getting on the plane full of journalists going to cover the riots. So, I got there, and as I'm driving in the taxi in town, people are literally pulling houses down and setting them on fire with Molotov cocktails. I thought, "Well, this probably wasn't a good idea."

There had to be that "uh-oh" moment when you ask, what am I doing? What am I doing here?

I called the local people and said, gee, you could have warned me. They said they'd thought it would be better. And then the next day, two of the accountants said, "Would you come out with us? One of our accountants hasn't come to work and we think they may have destroyed his home. We can talk about business while we're driving out there." I ultimately realized they wanted a white person in the car because that gave them some protection from some of the factions.

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This took us out of town, and while we were gone, there was a big explosion in the city. All the streets were rerouted, and we couldn't get back. They said they knew a back road, and we were on this back road for three, four hours. Every mile or so, a gang of people would stop our car and take petrol out to make firebombs that they were using to bomb houses on the side of the road. That finally stopped, though, because they found out that someone a few cars up from us was on the other side, and they took them out and killed them with a machete.

That's like something you see in the movies. How did you feel, being in that situation?

It was terrifying. The people I was with were saying, "Look irritated. They'll let you go if you look irritated." What? They're bombing houses, you know. I'm looking irritated. At one point they went to stop us again to get petrol and I said, "I'm not sure we have enough to get back to town. You can't have any." And they put a knife to the driver's face. So, yeah—take the petrol. Then they started to kill somebody else, but he proved that he was on their side. So, they put him in our car to bring him back into town. This poor man, with his arms bleeding, is holding up his passport so that nobody else will take him out and kill him. It was a very, very disturbing time.

How did you feel when you finally got back?

Everybody was coming back with horrible stories. We were under martial law, so they had tanks in front of the hotel, protecting us, so it was kind of secure there. We were locked down for a few days. When I got off the plane in Indonesia, which was my next stop, I remember getting a call from KPMG and thinking oh, they care; they're calling to see if I'm alive. They were calling to see if I could get back home a little faster because somebody else had put in for leave time and they wanted me to be in charge of another client. I think that's why I decided maybe I wasn't going to stay there forever.

Well, you got home, and you have a great story to tell.

"Be an accountant. See the world!"

And try to stay alive.

I also had a client that strip-mined uranium in Wyoming. And as your basic liberal San Franciscan, strip mining isn't a good thing. Making uranium for bombs is not a particularly good thing. And I would go out there from San Francisco, and they would give me this little Chevette to drive on these old dirt haul roads. It was smaller than the tires of all the equipment everybody else had. I thought I was going to be killed there as much as I did when we went to Sri Lanka.

And then you left KPMG.

I was in charge of the audit of the City and County of San Francisco, so I got to meet people there. That's what got me into the city. They offered me a job.

Tell us about those early years with that job.

I ended up getting a job with the Public Utilities Commission. I hadn't thought of them—they were a separate sub-unit of the city, in charge of water, transportation, and power. And it was one of those jobs where after I was there for a few months, I started realizing, OK, we have to fix this place



Left, Ed Harrington accepts the Lifetime Achievement Award from the San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association (SPUR) for his 37 years of service to the City and County of San Francisco.



get a job a year or two before I thought I was really qualified for it. So, I was always kind of stretching a bit—you're not going to be perfect because you don't even know the full job. But you can grow into it. Also, as soon as I get a job, one of my goals is to get rid of all the responsibility I have and give it to other people, which allows me to take on other responsibilities. So, if I get the job, I try to give my staff as much power as possible. That frees me up to do the next thing that needs to be done, and the next thing after that. Those are often the more fun things.

With the controller's job, you were in charge of finance and IT for the city. You also decided to split those into separate departments.

In some cases, the oldest computer systems that cities and counties had were financial systems, so they kind of grew up in the finance department. But when I got there, I had 500 staff—half IT, half finance. The IT people needed immediate, real, direct care. And at the same time, I was trying to take care of the payroll and the budgets and everything else for the city.

I had also been an IT consultant, and I knew that the future of IT was going to include telecom and a lot of other things. But we had radios in one place and telecommunications someplace else, and we had our television stations, and we had IT. They were all spread around, and I didn't think that made sense—we needed to combine them. And I had enough of a job without worrying about losing IT and telecom. The only problem was that the mayor didn't appoint a new person to be in charge of the new department for several years. So, instead of getting rid of IT, I ended up being in charge of 911 and TV stations and everything else until I could finally get him to hire somebody—which was more than I had bargained for.

up. Within seven years, I guess, I went from a beginning supervisor to the head of finance for the agency. I was in charge of payroll and claims and all the accounting and all the financial stuff and revenue collections. And within a few years I think we either fired or arrested pretty much everybody working in revenue collection for stealing money.

You discovered this on your own?

I had good staff. Three or four of us would go out every month and do overnight shifts to go out there and count the money, and we'd compare it to what staff was bringing in off the buses. If there was too much of a difference, we would analyze it even more. And we would get phone calls. We got a phone call from a casino saying one of our staff was there with buckets of quarters. That kind of alerted us.

It was a good learning experience—and I think I brought the place together in some ways. I had 10 staff members working on audits, and I took them out after the first financial audit. Afterward, some of them told me they'd worked for the city for 30 years and nobody had ever taken them out to lunch. Nobody would ever think that way. So, I helped bring in a different way of appreciating what people do for you. I had a really good team of people. I was nice to them, and they were nice to me.

Over a lot of your career, you seem to have been everybody's go-to guy. They trusted you and depended on you.

It's amazing how afraid people are of making decisions. And if you're willing to make decisions for them, they're happy to give it to you. Also, I seem to always

How did that part of your career turn out?

I was a controller for 17 years. I kept reinventing the job, but it's still the same job, in many ways. I started a group called the City Services Auditor Group, which is the only one like it in the United States. We had about \$20 million a year to think. I was able to hire consultants and a lot of people with master's degrees for our own internal McKinsey kind of organization within the city to help departments think through how they should operate or do community policing or staff a new hospital. It was fun. But you can only go through so many budget hearings and so many budget cuts.


So, when the mayor called and said, "You know, the Public Utilities Commission needs some help," I went over there. And it was great. We'd just started a \$4 billion rebuild of our water system, and it was stuck. The PUC runs water, power, and sewer operations. I stayed four and a half years, and we got all the major projects started—and

some of them finished. I started a whole strategic plan for wastewater and sewer, for sewer rebuilding. Now I'm on the Public Service Commission because after I was retired for a while, the mayor called and asked me if I would go back and help with it.

How did you get involved with GFOA?

I was asked to host the conference in San Francisco in 1998. I'd never been to a GFOA conference, so I went to one in 1996; I figured I'd better find out what GFOA does. But I was focused on the part I would be responsible for—the social aspects of it. I didn't really go to most of the conference sessions. When I did start to go to those, I thought, oh, GFOA does a lot of really good things. I realized that there were a lot of really bright people, and that networking with those really bright people was incredibly helpful. That was probably the most important part of GFOA—the networking and meeting people who knew what they were doing and could figure out what we should all be doing.

You're the sort of person who likes to keep busy. What have you been working on since you retired?

I was the treasurer for Greenpeace International for seven years, just as a rotation, and I spent a lot of time traveling the world doing a variety of things for Greenpeace. I was the treasurer for a group called SPUR, which is a local government, local nonprofit think tank in the Bay Area, for eight years. I teach at the University of San Francisco in the master's in urban and public affairs program. I'm on the board of a group called the Children's Funding Project in D.C., which is trying to figure out sustainable ways to raise money for children's services. And I do consulting work for a group called the Water Now Alliance, trying to help people figure out how to build green, sustainable water and wastewater infrastructure. So, I have a nice mix of different things, and it keeps me busy enough. 

Timothy Martin is GFOA's senior manager for digital experiences.

FINE(ance) Fridays

SEASON TWO: Begins November 4



Each **FINE(ance) Fridays** podcast features a candid conversation with a GFOA member. We talk about their life's journey and the important people who helped shape their path through a successful career in public finance. In their pursuit of building stronger communities and fiscal responsibility, you begin to see patterns emerge: a hardworking drive, a dedication to safeguarding public funds, a willingness to share and pass their success on to others, all with a good sense of humor.

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