Brandon: It's interesting because we all go through things in life that shape who we are and what we do. So I grew up and when I was in high school, my mom had a stroke. So it set my family through this chain of events where we basically didn't have any money. So in college I would work and I remember I used to work at the Corner Bar in Rockford and I would make money in a weekend, like $600 or $700, bust my butt. Then I'd give them all the money I had.

So I went through this vicious kind of cycle for a few years where it was like, "Geez man, it was like every paycheck you are just scraping by helping the family doing what you have to do." It was kind of a do or don't try kind of thing. And so I kind of made up my mind. I didn't want to be in that situation. And so in college I just studied finance and business economics.

So the main thing that I got from kind of all the experiences was money is a gift. It's a great servant, but a terrible master. And you see this all the time in this industry, people can be just enamored with it and kind of let it control them. So to make a long story short, I gravitated towards stability of money and planning properly, so that when I get older, my family didn't have to go through what my family went through.

So it was really all just a chain of events that occurred. I don't know. I mean, I didn't wake up one day I was like, "Oh, I'm going to manage money." It's kind of gradually evolved. I was in Chicago for a while after my undergrad and so I did investment banking, which is not really the management of money, but the management of balance sheets and income statements, and modeling. And I want to come back to Grand Rapids, I want to live here long term. It was just an easier lifestyle especially to raise a family.

So I was working at Greenleaf Trust on Kalamazoo and through a set of circumstances, someone had connected Doug and I together, and it took us about six months. But I said, "Listen, I want to grow a company and I want to be rewarded for growing the company and with big banks you're rewarding shareholders basically, and you're not keeping clients first." And I said, "I want to keep the client first, treat them like family, treat them like my family. If I wouldn't do it for my own family, I wouldn't do it for a client."

So Doug and I kind of had the same mantra of let's just do what's right because it's the right thing, and let's not worry about maximizing every dollar. Let's worry about maximizing the good that we're doing for other people. So we kind of had the same mentality when it came to managing clients and long-term, I mean, Doug can't work forever. And so there's an opportunity for myself to step in and hopefully take over kind of what Doug's built, and build upon it. So it took a little bit of time.

I laugh because Doug is old school, so Doug has... He's done things for 17 years here. So I mean he kind of what he is. I mean, he's probably one of the hardest people I've ever worked with. I mean, he's here the earliest and oftentimes he'll stay the latest. But Doug will do things because it's the right thing to do and he's consistent, and persistent.

So there've been times where I'm like, "There's no way this client's going to join us." Doug said, "Just give it time. We'll figure it out, we'll get through it." Lo and behold, it may take two or three or four years, but Doug would do it. Doug has taught myself quite a bit about this industry, how to treat clients, how to grow a company, how to manage a business.

You can work in the business or around the business. It's not the same thing. Doug's taught me the difference. I think in this industry, words are thrown around like fiduciary, fee only, holistic, and people don't really know what that means. So fiduciary is a very simple, by definition standards. It's a very simple definition. It is treat the client and ... Well, let me start over.

So basically what it means is fiduciary is okay. The client's interests are first and foremost the most important thing, period. It's not a debate. Clients' interest is the most important thing. Then from there it's, okay, we've got this puzzle and the puzzle is never clear when they walk in. People think that they have their financial picture fairly figured out and we sit down and we're like, "Whoa, hold on a minute here. We've got some pieces over here that we didn't think about."

So we don't write estate plans, but we need to review in an estate plan. Your 85-year-old father probably isn't the best person to be acting in your interest. So to be trustee, to be power of attorney, we probably should rearrange that. We'll look at insurance. Okay, insurance, we don't sell insurance, but you need to have the proper amount of insurance. That's why you hold insurance. Look at the tax return and say, okay, how are what were you doing over here from the money standpoint and money management, how is that impacting your taxes?

Because there's a very high correlation between what we do over here on the money management side will impact your taxes. And if we're not paying attention, we're going to miss the boat on that. Potentially put them in a precarious situation when it comes to income tax planning. So it's taking a step back and saying okay, you have all these pieces, right? We're going to help align them in your best interest and we're going to do it efficiently and if it's not best for you, we're just simply not going to do it.

The interesting part about doing what we do is no one dictates what we do. We do it because it's the best thing for the client, period. So if we use mutual fund A, B, C, or D, or if we use an ETF or if we use any in investment, we're not getting kickbacks. We're not taking money for investing in those products or those mutual funds or those holdings. We only collect revenue from the client. So if you look at taking a step back, we're sitting in the exact same side of the table. as a client. When they make more money, we make more money.

When they don't do as well, we don't do as well. There's no conflict of interest. If we say we believe you should do something, it's because we really think that's the truth. We're not making it another dime or dollar out of it. It's because we think long-term per your goals, this is what we should do. And that's it. I mean, when you take a step back, a lot of companies are worried about the shareholder first, right? Whether it be a large institution, an actual stockholder equity holder.

Our organization is entirely different. The client is first. Large banks, you know, clients will come to us from large banks and say, "I feel like a number or I feel like I'm not cared for." And the reality is, people do care about you there, but they care about the shareholder first, and the revenue comes from the client. The client should drive the decisions, not the shareholder. And they got it all backwards in this industry, a lot of people do. And it would be so much easier if they would just say, you know, "We're going to do this because of the right thing for the client and let the chips fall where they may."

We have nothing to sell. It's funny. People, they'll ask us, so what am I missing here? What are you selling me? There's no hidden strings here. I mean, we literally can't sell anything. It's impossible. We're just not aligned to allow that to happen. Every situation is different. So clients will oftentimes say, "Have you seen this before?" or "How do I compare to other clients or their people?" And it's like, well, let's take a step back. It's not about other people. It's about you and your goals are your goals. My goals are not your goals and your goals are not my goals. And that's fine.

Our goal is to help you accomplish yours. And so oftentimes, what we'll see is people will come in with this idea of here's the best way to get from point A to point B. And more often than not, they are wrong. There are multiple ways it's going to cap, we'll say. And so it's awesome for us to take a step back and say, because we're focusing on all these different areas, areas that you haven't thought about or haven't reviewed in awhile or you used to have an advisor who would talk to you once every few years.

We're not like that. And so we will sit down and we'll actually list out, here's the things we need to do to get you snapped back into a path that's actually right for you. And it's going to get you from point A to point B. Now, there are things we can't control. We can't control the markets. We can't control returns at times. There's things that we just have to live with, but we want to control the controllables. And it just takes a little bit of effort and consistency to ensure that that's happening.

To create order out of chaos doesn't happen overnight, it's a process. You know, we often say, "Listen, we're going to do a lot of heavy lifting in the beginning and then we're going to get you to the point here where you're going to feel better about the situation. You're going to see the difference. You're going to be to feel the difference, but you have to allow us to work with you and you have to work with us to make this happen." I mean, it's a team approach. We tell clients we're on the same team here. I mean, it's not you and us, it's we.

Everyone has goals, they just sometimes are not great at articulating what those goals are. And so what we'll do is we'll ask them, okay, what are your goals? And they'll say, "Well, I don't know. I've never, I want to retire. I want to not run out of money before I die. I want to be able to travel. I don't know, Brandon, what should my goals be?" Well, it depends. Through the process of asking them, well, what do you like to do? In an deal situation, when do you want to retire?

Okay, well how much do you think that's going to cost? Okay, what would you like to do for your family? Do you want to do an education plan for your kids? Do you want to leave a legacy? And all of a sudden you find out that they have more goals and they found out that they have more goals than they thought they had. And so you slowly kind of say, okay, your goals you defined as these few things, but there's actually 15 things here that are actually really important to this plan. And so it's, again, it's a process and it is an exercise.

And so they'll say, you know what? I came into this thinking I had a pretty simple, non-complex situation. It's a little more complex than I thought. And my goals are a little more vast than I thought they were. And through the process and the exercise, we'll start to pull them out, and then we can actually plan for each individual goal. I mean, we can do anything we want from a planning perspective, as long as the client comes together with us to create the plan and to execute it. I mean, it's not a one size fits all kind of thing.

Speaker 2: Cool, that's perfect.

Brandon: A lot of companies will say, "You know, we're small. A 401(k) doesn't make sense for us." And we'll say, "Well, maybe, but maybe not. I mean, do you know what your options even are in this space?" You know, people think company 401(k) is the only option we can ever use for employees. And that's not the reality of the situation. There are many options that they can use that may be simpler than a 401(k), but for larger companies that do want a 401(k), here's the difference, I think really from us and another company is we're stripping out a lot of the complexities.

We're adding a fiduciary element and we're reducing costs in an efficient way that will help you accomplish your goals. I mean, as a company, if you have a 401(k), you have a liability that rests on your shoulders if you don't properly set up your 401(k). And we help clients basically navigate that situation. Okay, what are your risks? But also what things you do really well, I mean it's not all negative. So yeah, it's, it all comes back to the goals again.

I mean, whether it's a business or whether it's an individual. I mean, tell us the goals. What do you like? What do you don't? What don't you like? And let's figure it out and work together. Yeah. So most people think of financial planners as they manage money. Okay. Well, yes we do, but it's much more than that. So if you look at a financial plan, what does it involve?

Well, yeah, you have to have money because you need money to survive and to retire. Right? So that's a central element, but you have all the other pieces that surround the money, that impact the money, and impact the goals. Goals are impacted not just by the pile of money that you've accumulated in your life. So what we have is, okay, you have this money, but when, if and when you pass away and not if, but when, where does that money go? To whom? And to what fashion? And is it private or public information?

We can control that with an estate plan, and we won't draft it, but an attorney will do that for us. If we look at income tax planning that surrounds the money. So anything we do on the money side will impact the taxes. Sometimes the tax planning will impact the money, right? So taxes in investment management really should be hand in hand. We look at ourselves as a boutique investment firm that really does a great job at tax planning. And we're not going to do an estate, we're not going to do a tax return because that's not our job.

But we're going to advise on that and we're going to be a partner with a CPA. And if we can save our clients their fee or reduce their fee because of properly executed tax planning, and I love that. Job well done. We look at insurance and we're not going to sell insurance, but you have insurance for a reason, right? If you pass away prematurely, you don't want to leave your wife and kids stranded with a mortgage or without your income, or without any college funds. I mean, if that is your goal, we can help do that.

But sometimes what we find is sometimes you have too much insurance, you don't need that much. Sometimes you need more than you thought you did. If we look at retirement planning, that's a big piece, right? So money goes hand in hand with retirement planning. So do you have enough? Well, I don't know. There's some levers that we can pull. You can save more, spend less. Sometimes people don't need to take the investment risk that they think they need to take to be successful in their goal planning.

And then we've got college planning. I mean, we have a lot of clients now who are young professionals who say, you know what? We want to incorporate college planning into our plan. Okay, well how much do you need? Well, I don't know if college is going to be really expensive one day. Okay, six and a half percent inflation rate, that's pretty high.

So what do we need to save? Probably more than you think. Well, let's get a plan involved around that and let's make sure that all these pieces work together. Because if you have one outlier, it could blow up your whole plan and people need to have someone who's going to be able to find that outlier and fix the outlier because they exist in every plan.

When we look at investment management or holistic planning or certified financial planners like we are, a lot of firms have a lot of gray hair, which is a great thing. And clients want the gray hair, which we have Doug for, which is great, but you know what? That guy's going to retire before these people get to retirement. I've got 30-40 years left in the tank here. I mean, if I'm someone who's going to be a client long-term of a firm, I want someone who's done some succession planning, who has some experience and knowledge in the gray hair side, but also got some intermediate experience here where they're going to be doing this for a very long time.

People think that gray hair is a solution and sometimes that gray hair is outdated. Because they've not kept up with the standards of what you have to keep up with this industry to learn and so I don't know if you can incorporate that into any of this, but sometimes I think younger is better. You get fresh ideas, you get newer technology, you get more efficient outcomes. As long as they know what they're doing. I mean, you're going to get a good outcome. You don't need gray hair and I can't tell you how many times people been like, "How old are you, Brandon?" What the hell is the matter?

I mean, are we accomplishing your goals? You should ask that question first, not how old are you? Well, I mean, people look at our size and they wonder, okay, do you have the technology or capabilities to keep up with this world? And the answer is yes. I mean, we have almost $200 million in assets under management, so we're not a giant, but we're large enough to be in this space and play well. We have the technology, we have apps on phones. We have automated systems that can track anything for clients. We have a back office that does all the tax preparation and tax recording work.

I mean, we have basically all the resources of a large firm, but you get the hands-on approach of a small firm. It's the best of both worlds, in my opinion. I mean, there aren't a lot of firms who can say, we can give you all the technology of larger firms because of the size of our firm, but we can give you the hands-on personalized approach of a small firm. We can do both. I mean, there's a reason why we limit our client load to a hundred clients per advisor.

When someone comes to me and say, "Yeah, my advisor has 300 clients." I say, "Well, is that something you should be bragging about or is that a problem potentially?" Because the more clients you have, the less time you had per client. It's a math to math problem here, which we do everyday for our clients. And so we're going to limit our client load to a manageable number. And that's somewhere around a 100 to 120 clients.

But after that, you can't keep track of clients. You don't know what's going on. I mean, clients will say, they'll call them, we'll ask how their kids are doing, and we'll ask, "Hey, does your accountant, do they remember this item this year?" 300 clients, there's no way you can do that. It's just there's just not enough brain capacity.