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Interview with Franklin Simon of The Simon Cos.: From hearing a life's journey to learning a life lesson

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Recently Eric Wilson of the New England Real Estate Journal sat down and interviewed Franklin Simon at The Simon Companies' offices in Braintree.

One reason I love my job is that I am a history enthusiast and working at the New England Real Estate Journal offers me a chance to read the past 50 years of the region's growth. When I had the opportunity to sit down recently with Franklin Simon of The Simon Companies, I jumped at the chance to hear his story first-hand.

How did you get started in development and property management?

I worked for a company in Boston, as the vice president of operations. That position included property management as well as development. Property management was a byproduct of what we do; we're developers. We build housing and office buildings with end-result being - once you build you, have to manage it. Consequently, we manage all of our own properties and we do manage for other people as third party management.

Which was your first project on your own?

The Simon Cos. started as a one person operation, based in the basement of my Quincy home. However, I did use secretarial services for letters, forms and such. I did that for three or so years. The first project I developed was in Plymouth on a gravel street and I still own it today. I worked with the redevelopment authority and planning board and they actually learned from me. It was all new to them and I used my experience. Plymouth has grown considerably since I first began in 1966.

Did you wait for your Plymouth project to be finished before looking to expand?

Once my first project was underway I needed to grow. I began looking around for raw land anywhere in New England for a new opportunity. Plymouth was first, Fitchburg was the second, and then I rezoned the town dump in the center of New Bedford. The project took me a little over a year to rezone, and the apartments that were being built were badly needed in 1968-1969. I was meeting with the planning board, redevelopment authority and city officials 2-3 nights a week during this time. Late nights of coming home at 10 or 11pm resulted in 500-600 units after rezoning. We had a great piece of land and gained a lot of notoriety. The school board noticed it shortly thereafter and determined it would be a great spot for the high school. Before I knew it, they took the land by eminent domain and I had settle for whatever they deemed the land was worth. I did not like their settlement offer, so we went to court and finally settled on an amount we were happy with. While this was going on, I met with the redevelopment board again and I was awarded a project on the waterfront, which I was built soon afterwards. I was awarded a second project, but at that time I had started a project in Newport, R.I.

Is there any differences in working in R.I. as opposed to working in Mass.?

Working in R.I. is no different for me than in Mass. To me, an opportunity is an opportunity. Travel

was no issue as I drove a beat up car that used to bounce around on the road. It made no difference. I use to start my mornings at 6-7 in the morning and meet contractors at the Howard Johnson in Quincy at the time. This was my office away from my house.

How did you get around to all these projects that were going on simultaneously?

Working on these multiple projects kept me busy. While working on the Newport project, I was putting the pieces together for the Fitchburg project and finishing up in Plymouth. At this time, I was the only person working at The Simon Cos. and I would have to go out to the airport and get into a helicopter to see all the projects in development I was working on in one day. My wife would wonder what I was doing, but I enjoyed it.

Over the next few years, we began expanding in Cranston, Westerly, North Providence and East Providence, R.I. I also built in North Attleboro, Mass. During this time we rented office space in downtown Boston. Our main office has always been centered around Boston.

Why did you move to Braintree from downtown Boston?

After a couple years of renting space in Boston, our landlord wanted to raise my rent which got me a little upset. A broker friend of mine suggested that I buy a building and showed me a building in Braintree which was about 40,000 s/f. I made a deal and bought the building with chewing gum and string. With very little to no money and nothing really to go on, I bought my first office building. Over the course of ten or so years I started to turn that building around, more than doubling its size. Rents ranged from \$6 a s/f to \$15 a s/f, at the time. Of course, today rent is substantially higher. That building is currently being renovated again. My office was located at that location until about ten years ago when my tenant said that the need for more space was driving them to look for a new building and I offered them my office as an alternative. I gave them my office and added to their existing office space. This relocated The Simon Cos. down the street in Braintree to a newly purchased building; bought shortly before we needed to move. I upgraded this building, which is what you do. If you want to grow a business, you don't strip it of its cash, you put it back into the property and build on it. I operate business based on that principle

We have properties in N.H., Mass., and R.I. We have offices in all but one property, that is managed by a different property manager. We have around 70 employees that managed roughly 25 or so properties.

Happy birthday! I understand you just celebrated your 90th birthday. What's keeps you coming into the office everyday?

I still come into the office everyday, even after celebrating my 90th birthday for a lot of reasons. Number one, I am a widower so I live alone and it gives me something to do. Working keeps me young and keeps my brain going all the time. I still have that burning desire to create. I love the negotiations, coming up with new ideas, working with architects, engineers, banks, contractors and other personnel. I help guide my staff here at the office and pride myself on being able to get around as well as use my mind to come up with new ideas all the time. I am currently working on projects of moderate size - 100 or so units each. With good markets and good space, this should be successful. I like to keep busy, that's me.

As we concluded the interview, we talked for a few more minutes about his time in the service. Franklin was driven to join the military at 17 because his friends were. I came into the interview thinking I was going to hear Franklin's life story and I walked out knowing Franklin's life lesson, "You don't take or strip from, you build or invest in, whether people or property, that's how you do business."

Eric Wilson is a social media consultant and co-host of the NEREJ Radio Show.

New England Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540