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Through tailored planning, attentive service, and a commitment to education, **PAX Partners of Raymond James** aims to redefine the relationship between client and financial advisor.

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PROFILE

Partners for Life

by BILL DONAHUE | photography by JODY ROBINSON

Through tailored planning, attentive service, and a commitment to education, PAX Partners of Raymond James aims to redefine the relationship between client and financial advisor.

The bond between a financial advisor and a client is precious, if not sacred. At least, that's how Drew Bilotta, CFP®, sees it. Whereas some view this relationship as purely transactional, Bilotta considers it a "partnership of equals," in some ways similar to the relationship between a physician and a patient.

"Before a doctor offers a diagnosis, he or she is going to run the patient through a series of tests. We're the same way," says Bilotta, senior vice president of investments for PAX Partners of Raymond James, a financial planning firm based in Devon. "We're going to go through all of the math—income, cash flow, tax analysis—and approach the client's household as a business. Once we understand the client's goals and have an informed analysis, we can then determine the investment vehicles and the rate of return needed to help them get to where they want to be."

Led by Bilotta, PAX Partners offers a comprehensive suite of services, including financial planning, business planning, and retirement planning, as well as investment strategies and fixed-income strategies, among others. Regardless of need, Bilotta says the firm treats every client—or "partner," in the firm's lexicon—as an individual, with unique goals, interests, and financial circumstances. An individual who is just starting out may be looking to simply become more educated in basic financial principles, whereas an individual who is on the cusp of their pre-retirement years may be looking to realign their assets to maximize income and minimize taxes.

"We deal in a world in which the markets aren't within our control, so I wanted to come up with a way to focus on what I could control and then deliver solutions to help people make educated decisions," he says. "The true value of what we offer someone is education. When I started this practice, I wanted to create a methodology that would live on, one that would enable clients to have a true understanding of where they are and where they want to go, but also how their money can work for them so they can get there."

Bilotta began to formulate his forward-thinking methodology in 1985, while undergoing the rigorous process of earning the CERTIFIED FINANCIAL PLANNER designation. As part of this certification, he agreed to always put his clients' interests first when dispensing financial planning advice and services. He also agreed to complete a minimum of 30 hours of continuing education every two years in order to better serve clients and stay abreast of developments in the financial planning industry.

"As a CFP®, I'm a fiduciary, so I'm going to tailor each structure to the best interests of the client," he says, adding that PAX Partners' affiliation with Raymond James provides access to a breadth of resources from one of the industry's largest independent financial services firms. "We aim to offer our partners the best possible suite of personalized services for their individual economic situation. We know we have an enormous responsibility to the people we serve. At the same time, we think people appreciate the kind of value we offer."

The practice's name, PAX Partners of Raymond James, speaks to this value in more ways than one. Pax is Latin for peace, which is telling because the firm strives to provide partners with peace of mind. In addition, Bilotta says PAX is an acronym, short for "planning around expectations."

Value is a two-way street, however. Much like the physician-patient relationship, the client has a big role to play in assuring a fruitful partnership. A PAX Partners advisor may offer an informed prescription, but if the client doesn't follow the advisor's game plan—by spending more than they make, for example—the client will likely fall short of achieving their goal.

"Some people are looking for an advisor who can make their troubles to go away, but that's not who we are," Bilotta says. "Rather, we're looking to build partnerships, and clients have equal responsibility. In a partnership, both sides are working toward a common goal, and in this case that goal is to help clients achieve their long-term goals."

Planning Ahead

Bilotta has spent more than three decades helping others plan for the future. Likewise, he has proven that he's not immune to his own good advice. For example, the firm recently added Mike Antoni in the role of financial advisor.

"I lived down the shore in Avalon for more than 25 years, and Mike's family were my neighbors," Bilotta says. "I got to know him very well. Based on what I know about him as a person and the business experience he has accumulated so far, I think he has all the ingredients he'll need to do a great job for our firm and our partners."

Antoni's hiring has effectively expanded a seasoned client-services team that includes Kirsten E.H. Landreth, WMS®, senior registered client service associate, and Frances Kubiak, senior client service associate.

"We look at each client as a person, not in terms of how much money they have," says Landreth. "I also like the fact that the firm is multigenerational and diverse; besides financial planning, Drew has expertise in estate planning, the gentle and humane transition of wealth, and strategies for small businesses. Whatever the case may be, we try to take the emotional aspects out of the equation and keep the client centered on their personal plan and personal goal so the money is there when they need it."

Kubiak, for her part, approaches each day with the goal of answering a simple two-pronged question: "Who can I help, and how can I help them?"

"This business can be very confusing for people who are new to it, so I'm sympathetic when someone calls and doesn't understand some of the language," she says. "It's all about customer service. Maybe someone's mother has died and they need help with some documents. No matter the situation, my goal is to develop a good rapport with the client and help them through it."

As for Antoni, he has passed his FINRA Series 7 and Series 66 exams, which enable him to provide financial services in the state of Pennsylvania. After graduating from Drexel University in 2014 with a degree in finance, he managed a sales territory in New York and later moved to California, where he worked for a family-owned insurance company. In the process, he gained a real-world education in essential values such as integrity, honesty, and trust.

"I learned how important it is to be trustworthy and to always have your clients' best interests in mind," Antoni says. "In most forms of American business, it's a simple transaction—you say you're going to provide a service and you provide that service, and then the relationship is done. We want to go above and beyond that by providing value, and proving our value, over the long term."

In the not-too-distant future, Antoni expects to follow in Bilotta's footsteps by earning his CFP® designation. For now, he's focused on building his knowledge base and meeting with prospective partners. He's happy to hone his skills alongside Bilotta, who's quick to note that he's not going anywhere anytime soon.

"I couldn't see myself with a better mentor," Antoni says. ■

Mike Antoni (left) recently joined PAX Partners as a financial advisor. He looks forward to honing his skills alongside Drew Bilotta, senior vice president of investments and founder of the practice.

PAX Partners' client-services team includes Frances Kubiak, senior client service associate (left), and Kirsten E.H. Landreth, WMS®, senior registered client service associate.

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