

A REASON TO

Celebrate

10 YEARS STRONG.
105 EMPLOYEES.
\$125 MILLION REVENUE.

TRISURA PRESIDENT AND
CEO MIKE GEORGE VALUES
RELATIONSHIPS OVER PROFITS,
WE LEARN, AS HE OPENS UP
ABOUT STARTING AN INSURANCE
COMPANY ON A NAPKIN, AND
WHAT CATCHING CHICKENS
TAUGHT HIM ABOUT BUSINESS...

BY GLORIA CILLIERS



JAMIE HOGGE

“When you start a company, you have the advantage of hand-picking staff. At Trisura, we have a ‘No Jerks Allowed’ policy”



When president and CEO Mike George co-wrote the business plan for Trisura on the back of a napkin a little over 10 years ago, the dream was to become a significant player in the specialty lines insurance market.

Little did he know that, today, the company he built with partners John Garner and Bob Taylor would go on to exceed their financial and growth expectations, against the odds.

It's a truly Canadian success tale of the David and Goliath kind, say those in the know. And Trisura just keeps on growing, at a consistent rate of 17 percent year on year, and, in the process, collecting accolades and attracting the best talent in the field.

In September, Trisura was ranked on the PROFIT500 list of Canada's Fastest-Growing Companies for its five-year revenue growth of 136 percent. The insurer was recently also named as one of Canada's Best Small & Medium Employers for 2017, having won this ranking for 2016 as well.

“It started with a dream and a napkin”

Insurance startups in Canada are rare. Starting one completely from scratch with the support of Canadians and run by Canadians? Virtually unheard of.

But that only made the challenge more appealing, says George from a boardroom at Trisura's headquarters in downtown Toronto. He's collected, confident and unconventionally candid. “But that's Mike,” you'll often hear his colleagues fondly say. “He's dynamic and brilliant, and so down to earth...”

On the back of that napkin 10 years ago, Mike, John and Bob (who'd worked together for a long time) mapped out the ambitious Trisura plan: within five years, with 50 employees, achieve \$50 million in top line revenue and \$5 million in underwriting profit.

Before long, they had the financial backing of Brookfield Asset Management, a global alternative asset manager with over \$225 billion in assets under management, and the support of three multinational reinsurers.

At their first meeting with the Office of the Superintendent of Financial Institutions (OSFI), Trisura's tagline was born: “One of the OSFI

representatives said our presentation was ‘a step above a step above’. I'm not kidding!” George says, amused.

It's the same motto with which the three founders wanted the company to operate from day one, and the same manner in which the company does business today, he explains.

By March 2006, Trisura recorded its first revenue: an Ontario policy with a premium of \$1520.

This year, Trisura will write close to \$125 million in revenue, equally split between its surety, specialty insurance and warranty products, with 105 employees and a distribution network of over 150 brokerages in six cities across Canada.

That's a long way from inhabiting borrowed office space and begging for office furniture 10 years ago. And double the napkin numbers since.

“And we've grown it all organically. Less than 2 percent of our business growth has been through acquisitions,” George says.

Personally witnessing (through the sale of London Guarantee in 2002, of which he was senior vice-president) “how an acquisition by a multinational company can change the culture of a business” was the spark to starting Trisura.

“Not all large international companies understand the uniqueness of doing business in Canada. And I wanted to get back what we had lost.”

Bringing some of his old team back together was the foundation of the unique Trisura culture, he adds.

His wife of the past 27 years, Pat Hoddy, who, at the time had left her job as a high school teacher to raise their three sons, Spencer (23), Trevor (21) and Tyler (20), did not hesitate for a second when he told her of his dream, says Mike. “She said: ‘Go for it!’”

“No Jerks Allowed”

Trisura was founded on relationships, George says.

“When you start a company, you have the advantage of hand-picking staff. At Trisura, we have a ‘No Jerks Allowed’ policy,” he smiles. “No. Seriously. I want only solid, standup people on our team. And when people love working together, everything else becomes easy. Growth just happens and profitability follows suit.”

Not that the insurer hasn't seen its fair share of challenges.

“The 2008/2009 financial crisis impacted our investment portfolio hard and we had another bad loss early on, when an Ontario contractor disappeared, leaving us to foot the bill on a significant claim. But it's how you cope with the situation that matters.”

At Trisura, they rally around challenges like a SWAT team to find a solution together.

It's a tactic he's learnt from several influential people in his life, George says. Taylor is one of them, as is George Petropoulos, to whom George owes his first big break in the insurance industry. And then there's his dad, Peter, a retired McMaster University president, who instilled in him a strong work ethic.

“My parents gave me a really good education and moral values, but if I wanted something, I had to work for it.”

“What my mom taught me about giving back”

George's late mother, Gwen, was a massive influence in his life. “She taught me to be a decent human being,” he says, getting emotional. As a young child, George sometimes accompanied Gwen, a nurse, as she tended to sick children while volunteering for the Red Cross in Tanzania. It's no surprise then, that today George is an active supporter of Covenant House Toronto and chairs their Executive Sleep Out event. And he regularly volunteers for and serves on the board of Ontario's Children's Wish Foundation.

And it's no wonder that, of all Trisura's core values, giving back resonates with him the most.

His mom's also the one who encouraged his financial career.

“After completing a B.Sc and not knowing what to do next, my mom told me I'm a born salesman. I then ended up falling into insurance through playing hockey,” he laughs, explaining how, after meeting Petropoulos in a hockey league change room, he got offered his first surety financial analyst job in 1988.

His mother was right.

“I fell in love with the insurance industry right away,” George recalls. “More particularly, with building relationships with clients and brokers.”

Trisura's brokers are its bread and butter, George says, and that won't change. While there's growing concerns around broker relevancy, especially in personal lines, George says there'll always be clients who need brokers. “But I do see the broker role changing to more of a professional specialist service, rather than just selling product.”

Ten years from now, the mediocre, generalist brokers will be in a tough spot while the cream will have risen to the top.

He has so much faith in the broker that he's

encouraged his sons to follow in his footsteps. George's oldest is now a broker at AON, while the younger two are studying business.

“These days, our industry is attracting the brightest and best; it's no longer a last-resort career. I've always told my sons insurance is a fascinating and challenging business that you can do very well in, if you're good at it.”

And being good at it means adapting and innovating, like launching Trisura's online portal, which has enabled brokers to write \$14 million from over 20 000 online transactions this year.

Apart from being described as an all-out nice guy, George has been heralded as an innovator who thinks outside the box in an industry desperately striving to stay on top of technological advancements.

But he insists he alone can't take the credit. He recognizes team achievements, and sometimes even rewards mistakes with the office “Blunder Award,” all in the name of learning and moving on.

“What catching chickens taught me about business”

He's learnt a great deal through working hard from an early age, George says. “I delivered newspapers at 10, worked on a vineyard, swept steel mill floors and cut lawns all through high school.” But it's catching chickens at 16 that taught him one of the most important lessons in his career, he says. “I grew up in Dundas Ont., a community surrounded by farming. Catching chickens for harvesting was very lucrative and I caught 3,000 to 4,000 a night!”

But he worked with a group of other kids and they divvied up the pot at the end of each shift. “It really taught me the value of teamwork. Of showing up and doing your fair share.” That's why Trisura's future success depends on his entire team, George says. The “napkin with the 2020 plan” expects the company to reach over \$200 million in revenue, with around 150 staff. And there's no doubt in his mind they'll achieve it.

A Step Above

He's that confident because he knows Trisura will “strive to remain a step above the rest.” “We put our brokers first so they can put their clients first,” George says.

That's why he welcomes change.

“Relationships get diminished in this move towards going direct,” he says. “So I say: Let other insurers go direct. In the end, people still want relationships. And the insurance industry is big enough for us to carry on evolving where relationships still rule the day.” **TB**

\$1,520
first policy in 2006

\$200M
2020 revenue goal



Winners
Canada's Best
Small & Medium
Employers
2016 - 2017