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Origins

MY JOURNEY IN the life insurance industry began on Halloween night in 1960. (Stay with me, now—I was born in 1979, but my story began before my parents even dreamed me up.) My then eight-year-old father, George, was out trick-or-treating when he spotted another young boy in a ghost costume. The “ghost” kept tripping over the hem of his costume—and candy went flying everywhere. George stopped his trick-or-treating, helped the boy to his feet, collected his candy, and then they went on together to the next house. Despite George’s efforts, his new friend kept falling. After the fourth time the ghost tripped, George finally asked the other boy his name. “Walter,” the ghost said, grateful that George continued to help him while the other kids just passed him by.

Little did young George know that his small act of kindness that Halloween night would change his life—and

that the ripple effect it produced would influence mine. Young George Groome and Walter Colton quickly became friends. Once brought together, the two were inseparable. They remained friends through adulthood, rooming together during college at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. (Go Heels!)

My father's story is a riches-to-rags then back-to-riches story. George was the youngest of five children, and his father, W. J., had a lucrative job at the Pepsi-Cola Bottling Company. When my father was eight, W. J. lost his job at Pepsi. Serendipitously, George met young Walter around the same time, and he started spending a lot of his time at the Colton house.

Young George's life was very different from the lives of his older siblings. Reluctant to talk about his childhood, my father often jokes that he spent so much time at the Coltons' because he just liked hanging out with Walter's three sisters! He doesn't mention the mansion he grew up in—or the two full-time housekeepers who worked there—before they lost everything when he was only eight years old. He doesn't like to tell us about having to work at a local factory during high school, sweeping glass on the night shift, to help support their household. He doesn't talk about the many nights he spent at the laundromat with his mom, or the time he stood up to his father when W.J. was in an alcohol-induced rage. Although I can't blame

him for loving the Colton girls as a teenager, I know the real reason he spent so much time there was because they made him feel like family.

Tradition was important to the Colton family, and in keeping with tradition they always went to Henry Colton's office on the fifteenth floor of the BB&T building in downtown Asheville, North Carolina, to watch the Christmas parade. George was always included. During Thanksgiving of 1972, as my father was nearing the end of his college career at UNC's business school, that tradition of watching the Christmas parade turned into much more. When the parade ended, everyone went his or her own way except for George and Henry, who sat quietly gazing over downtown and the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains beyond it. George said to Henry, "I don't know exactly what you do, Mr. Colton, but I know it has something to do with finance. I know you're well respected and successful, and that you always seem to have a smile on your face. I want to be just like you. Can I come work with you after graduation?"

With his own son Walter pursuing a career in international business, Henry had already considered hiring George to help continue the family business. A brilliant student, George was not only highly qualified, but had the necessary motivation to succeed in a demanding business. Henry knew he could count on young George to make his way in the financial business and do it the "right way,"

which, to Henry, was “his way.” The two looked at each other thoughtfully, and after a moment, Henry said, “Of course.”

That first chance encounter, trick-or-treating in 1960, led to my father dedicating his life to the wealth management and insurance protection industry. Dad went to work for Mr. Colton after his final exam, and the company began to evolve into the incredible organization it now is. Henry Colton’s impact on my father’s life shaped *my* life before I even understood how important it truly was. The name of the firm today, Colton Groome Insurance Advisors, Inc., pays homage to the man who first planted the seed for my father’s career . . . and for mine.

Before I was drawn to my father’s career, I followed in my mother’s footsteps, becoming a teacher in an inner-city school system after graduating from college. I started in an at-risk elementary school, where I coached the middle school basketball team.

I loved the impact I was able to make on other people’s lives as a teacher and coach, but I eventually realized how badly I wanted to learn about the business world. Who better to teach me than my father, the very best man—and professional—I’d ever been around? He was in the prime of his career at the time, and I realized what a rare opportunity I had to learn from someone so experienced and educated. My other option, of course, would have been

to go back to school for business, but I believed (and still believe) that a person can earn a master's degree from an educational institution or a PhD in life experience. I chose the latter, and, from then on, I attended the “George Groome School of Business” every day.

So many businesspeople of my generation want to follow the investment manager track and work on Wall Street or the hedge fund industry. After observing and working with my father, I knew I didn't want to manage money like everyone else. I wanted to protect families. My personal story shows how important families and multigenerational legacies can be. I want everyone out there to protect their legacies—not just for today, but for generations to come.



From L to R: Tate Groome, Matt Groome, Henry Colton, George Groome