

MEN *at* WORK

NEED AN ACCOUNTANT?
YOU WON'T FIND ONE HERE.
MEET THREE GREENWICH RESIDENTS
WHO FOUND SUCCESS FAR OFF
THE BEATEN CAREER PATH

by **STEPHEN SAWICKI** photographs by **BOB CAPAZZO**

FOR MOST OF US, WORK IS A FACT OF LIFE. But if you love what you do, it can seem more like play. It's easy to identify the folks who bring passion to their jobs. They have a certain look in their eyes. They move a little more briskly. And when they tell you about their latest project, their excitement is almost palpable.

A lot of those types live in and around Greenwich. They hold all kinds of jobs, some of which you may never even have imagined. Simply put, they found, or created, full-time occupations that fed their enthusiasm. Here, we talk to three such individuals. Take a few minutes to read their stories. Then get back to work. Your own dreams are waiting. »



THE MONEY MAN

David Mickelson,
Greenwich Research Inc.

“Gee, I wish you’d find me.”

That’s the response David Mickelson usually gets when he’s at a social gathering and he mentions what he does for a living. Everyone claims they would be happy to hear from the man whose job is to track down missing heirs, owners of unclaimed assets, and others who have unexpected funds waiting for them. But reality often plays out differently. “Some people are skeptical,” says Mickelson, who runs Greenwich Research Inc. “A few are downright suspicious.” Under his breath, he mutters, “I hate those people.”

And though you can’t blame folks for being wary, Mickelson (pronounced “Michaelson”) is the real deal. He has a friendly, unassuming manner, references galore, and a track record that says you should think twice before telling him to beat it. “It’s a wonderful business to be in,” Mickelson says, “to be able

to reunite people with money they otherwise wouldn’t know they were entitled to.” Many times, a significant inheritance hangs in the balance.

Taking on assignments from probate attorneys and others involved in settling estates who are seeking relatives, known and unknown, of a decedent, Mickelson also finds missing creditors who have money owed them in long-running bankruptcy cases. And though he often works on an hourly basis, he accepts many jobs at his own risk, working out a deal for a percentage of the payout when and if he locates the person in question. “We’re not always successful, obviously,” he says.

Still, he’s had plenty of winners. Using private investigators and genealogical researchers from around the world, Mickelson has found grateful beneficiaries near and far, some of whom received a million dollars or more. When a person dies without a known heir, Mickelson and company become history detectives. Sometimes they pore through records from as far back

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as 200 years ago, then work forward, creating a family tree, and pinpointing the nearest living relative.

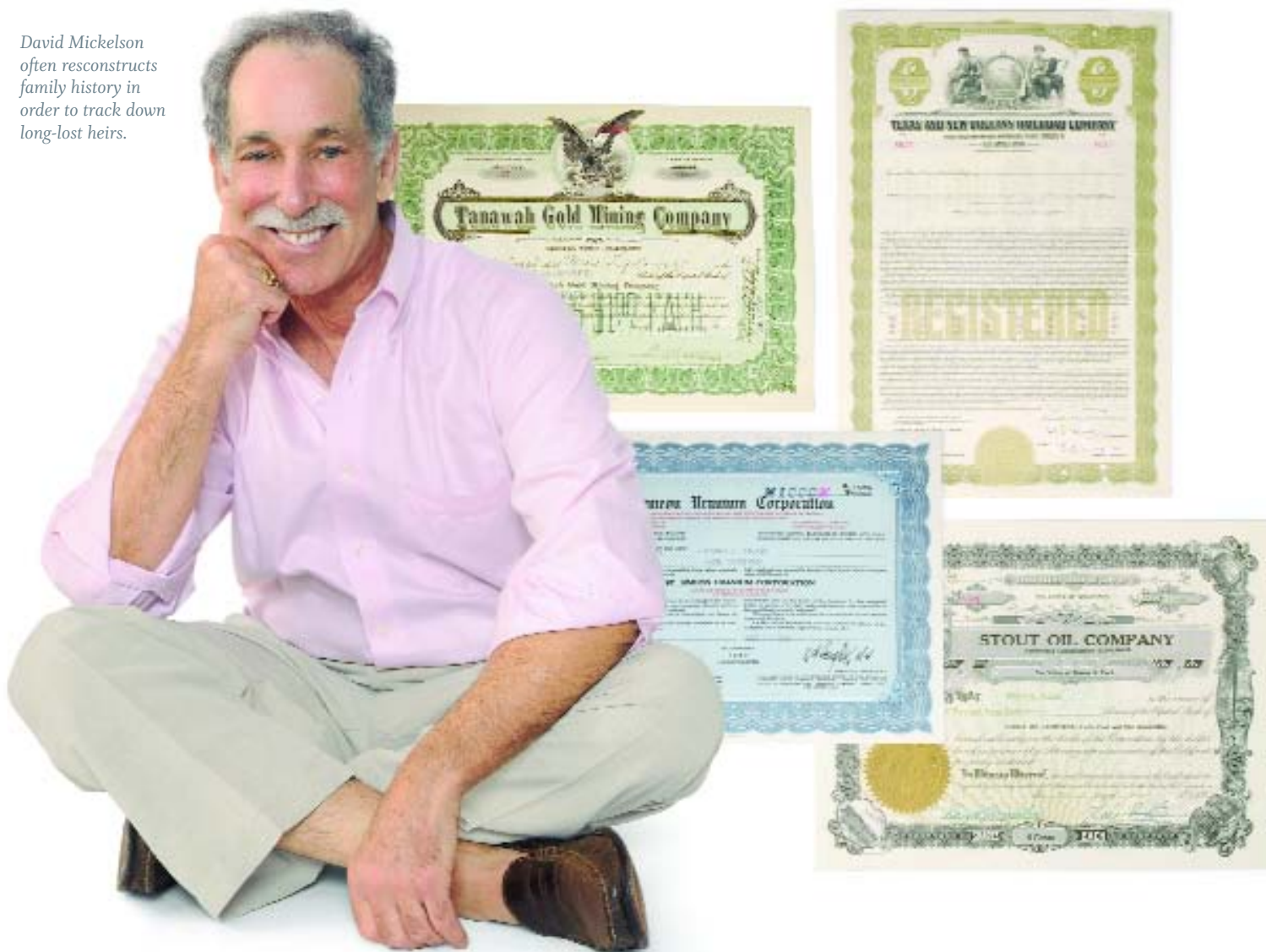
“It’s a big puzzle,” he says. “It’s very gratifying to solve these mysteries. And every story is different. Sometimes we come across families in which members haven’t been in touch or even know about each other.” (His wife, Shree, for her part, is a personal trainer at the Greenwich YWCA. Both have adult children from first marriages.)

He tells of one case in which his reconstruction of the family history of a Greenwich woman with no known heirs took him and his researchers through immigration-ship passenger lists, census data, cemetery records, musty registers in a small town in Slovakia, and even the horrors of the Holocaust. The search continued for three years. At the end of the trail, David and his people found a man who had been given over to the care of a family in Slovakia when he was just an infant while his parents, who were Jewish, fled and were soon murdered by the Nazis. In the end, that man, who came to live in Switzerland, received close to a million dollars from an American half-first cousin he never even knew existed.

Then there was the woman in Maryland a few years back who was overjoyed when Mickelson sent her \$20,000 she had never expected. “She was a relative of somebody who owned property in Czechoslovakia and was entitled to reparations from the U.S. government due to some plan that the Allies concocted at the end of World War II,” Mickelson says. “Here it is, 2000 and something, and the war had been over for more than fifty years, and here she is getting a check.”

Pat Gallant, a writer in New York, received a letter from Mickelson about eight years ago alerting her to some unclaimed funds. (Typically, he will not reveal the amount up-front.) Everyone warned her this was probably a scam, but since Mickelson wanted no money beforehand, never requested any personal information, and had references, she finally gave him the go-ahead. Not long afterward, she had a check in

David Mickelson often reconstructs family history in order to track down long-lost heirs.



hand, from a stock that someone else may have bought for her. “It was a substantial amount,” Gallant says. “It made an appreciable difference in our bank account.”

For some reason—Gallant says no one could explain why—the bank holding it was unable to find her or perhaps never tried. “Without him,” she says of Mickelson, “I don’t think it ever would have gotten to me.”

Occasionally, he does his job a little too well. Every now and then, David sniffs out someone who doesn’t want to be sniffed out. And try though he may, those people want nothing to do with him. “I can count those instances on one hand,” he says. “We never find out why they don’t want to be found, but it’s quite clear that’s what the situation is. Who knows who they’re running from? And it’s not as if we’re collecting money from these people. It’s the opposite.”



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