

FORUM

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Family Man

New Advocis chair
talks about life
lessons, work-life
balance and his
Advocis family



SPECIAL REPORT

The proposed
national strategy
on financial
literacy

*Incoming
chair Robert
McCullagh*

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Family MAN

Financial advisor Robert McCullagh brings thoughtful leadership and a long-term perspective to his new role as Advocis chair. He talks to **Kristin Doucet** about life lessons, work-life balance and the family he calls Advocis

Anyone who knows Robert McCullagh knows these two things about him: he loves his job and he's a family man through and through.

"If I won Lotto 649 tomorrow, I'd come right back to work," says the 44 year-old Calgary native and father of three.

But McCullagh, who holds the CFP, CLU, RHU and CH.F.C. designations, didn't always love his job. In fact, he never imagined making a career for himself in the financial services industry at all. Like many of his contemporaries who have made a success of this business, he "backed into it."

While working at a service station as a teen, McCullagh learned bookkeeping and made regular deposits at a Royal Bank branch across the street. The bank manager learned of McCullagh's plans to attend the University of Calgary and offered to recommend him for the summer hire program at RBC. After three years of university and a year of selling financial services for RBC, McCullagh joined Prudential of England as a life agent in 1989.



Robert McCullagh and his family (left to right) Sam, Cara, Sara and Sara

The rest of McCullagh's story reads like the tale of the phoenix: a struggling 21-year old agent who, having barely survived his first few years in the industry, rose from the ashes and soared to success. It's a story many industry veterans can relate to, and a reminder that this business is not for the faint of heart.

"In the early days, my production was less than stellar," laughs McCullagh, who went on to achieve Million Dollar Round Table (MDRT) status in 2001, one of the highest recognitions an advisor can receive for exemplary performance and the highest standards of ethics, knowledge, service and productivity.

According to a 2004 LIMRA report on career producers, almost 60 per cent of rookies don't make it through their first two years on the job. As it happened, McCullagh was part of the 40 per cent that do. Thanks to some financial support from his parents during the initial difficult period, he remained at Prudential for 10 years, developing his financial planning skills and building a clientele.

In 1999, McCullagh sold his Prudential book and became an independent broker with Benefit Planners, a successful Calgary-based practice that provides holistic financial planning solutions to clients and business owners. His team at Benefit Planners includes partner Al Dowdell and administrative assistant Liz Ferguson.

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"Robert is thought of very highly by his clients, co-workers and friends, and is very genuine and passionate about the role he plays in helping all of them meet their personal as well as financial goals," says Ferguson, with whom he has worked for 22 years (first at Prudential and then later at Benefit Planners). "He always makes time for everyone."

The financial hardship McCullagh experienced early in his career is what "keeps it real" for him. It's given him an understanding of what it means to struggle financially as well as a natural empathy for people who are burdened by debt. It has also given him an appreciation for just how far he has come.

"This business allows you opportunities well beyond your dreams. It's all a matter of the hard work," says McCullagh. "This business is front-loaded — you pay for your success, but the hard work is rewarded in time."

What also kept McCullagh going when money was tight were the friendships he had formed while taking the Life Underwriters Association Training Course (LUATC), now known as the Life Licensing Qualification Program (LLQP). To this day, he keeps in touch with two of the three people from his class.

McCullagh went on to become an Advocis LUATC instructor, which led to teaching CFP courses at Mount Royal University and the University of Calgary. To this day, he teaches financial planning at Mount Royal and says that over the years he has honed his ability to break down complex financial concepts and explain them in simple terms to students and clients alike.

The irony of this "simplifying" skill is not lost on McCullagh, who in grade three was diagnosed with a reading comprehension learning disability. As a child, he was taught how to cope by using different learning strategies.

"My learning disability allowed me to see the world differently than other people see the world," he explains. "As a result, I don't experience information or learn like most people do. It has made me an extraordinary listener."

Much of McCullagh's "half-full" perspective on life is a result of personal hardships and life experiences: first, growing up with a disability; then, his struggles as a new advisor; and later, as a young father who almost lost his third child.

Three years into starting his own practice, McCullagh and his wife of 13 years, Carla, had two children under the age of three (Jordyn, now 12, and Sam, now 10) and were expecting their third. When his daughter Sara was born nine years ago, she was gravely ill. After several weeks of being in and out of

hospital, Sara was diagnosed with hypercalcemia — the presence of abnormally high levels of calcium in the blood that can result in kidney failure and/or coma.

There were many doctor's appointments and tests for Sara in those early days, and McCullagh made a point of being at each one. Once treated, Sara recovered but still had her fair share of challenges. Her weight gain and muscle development was slow in the first year, and there was a tracking problem with one of her eyes. (She would later go on to have four surgeries to correct this.)

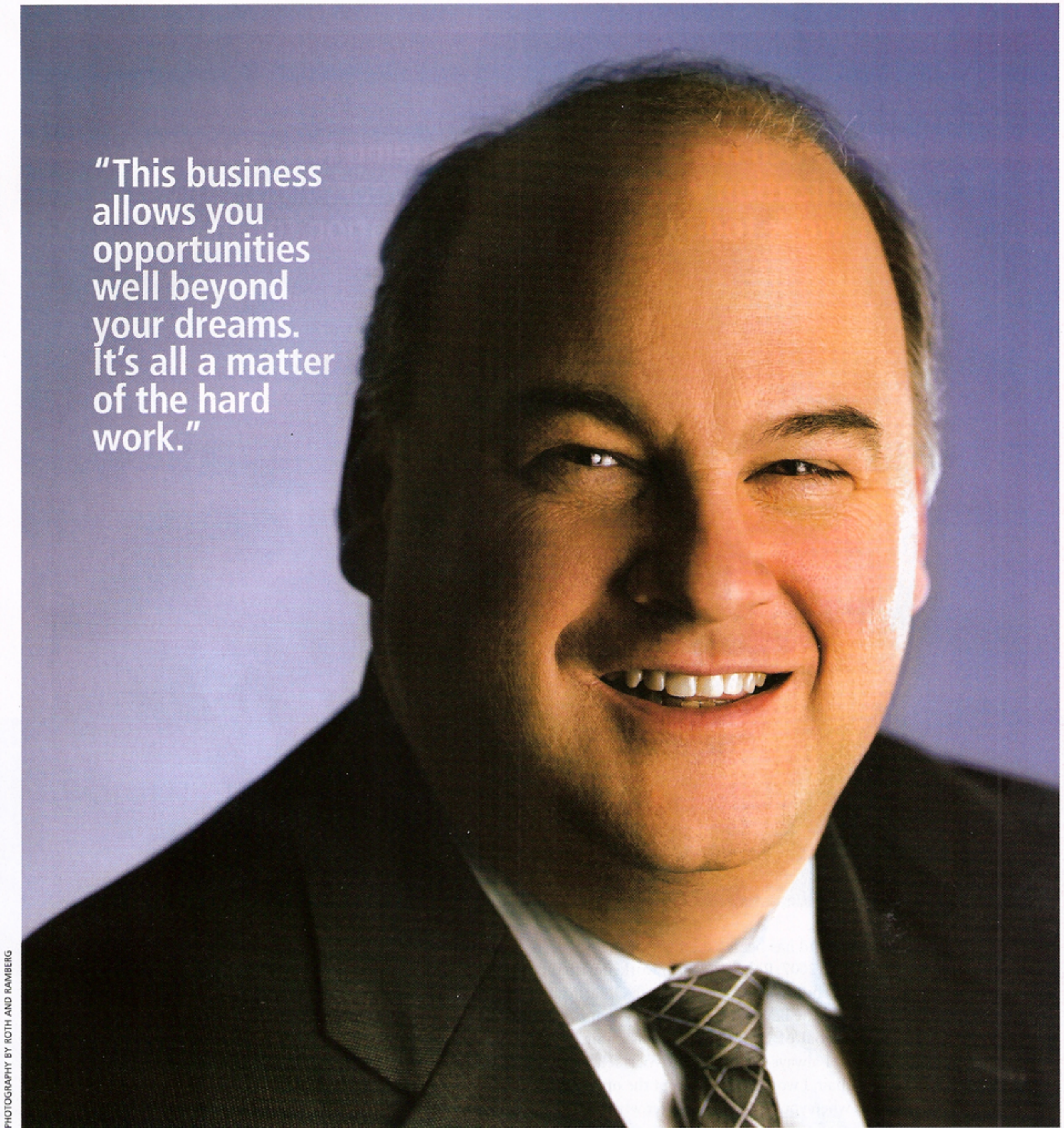
"Sara is one hell of a tenacious girl," says McCullagh, who now has first-hand knowledge of what a disability or sickness in a family can do. That aside, he is grateful for the insight that such an experience has given him.

"The lesson of life here is that you look around at your relationships and you either feel great joy or great frustration and sadness. What happened to Sara strengthened our relationships — both in our marriage and as a family."

In the past, McCullagh has turned hardships into opportunities to reflect on what he has, and today he takes nothing for granted. To that end, he works hard but also understands what

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it is to have a healthy work-life balance. McCullagh has always put his family first. Every night when in Calgary he has dinner with his family and tucks his children into bed. Even while at Advocis board meetings, he is known to slip out during dinner to tuck his children in over the phone.

Beyond his immediate family, McCullagh considers his office and Advocis colleagues his extended family.

"I think 'family' creates the fabric of the community that we are all a part of. I see Advocis as the community of families. [Every volunteer and member] has a family and a family of

clients ..." McCullagh explains. "You become family with those you are connected with, so I could be part of my primary family but also be connected with my family at work and a family of advisors with whom I share the same focus and burdens. I've been very grateful for my Advocis family; it's kept me in the business, and sharing ideas with fellow members has helped in my success."

McCullagh has shown his gratitude to the Association over the years through his tireless volunteering. Since 1992, he has held several positions within his local Calgary chapter, includ-

"I'm much more interested in seeing how the organization will look five to 10 years from now. Our work today will set the foundation for that."



Robert McCullagh (centre) and his team at Benefit Planners: administrative assistant Liz Ferguson and partner Al Dowdell

ing president in 2004, and has been a member of the Advocis board of directors since 2007. Robert has also worked with the four regional Advocis schools — Okanagan, Banff, Ontario and Atlantic — and chaired the Banff School for many years.

"I never had the goal of being the Advocis chair," says McCullagh. "And yet, I always said that if Advocis felt I could offer something as chair, I would gladly accept the opportunity ... As in a family, when you're asked, you offer what you have — you give everything."

"Advocis has a rich history of leadership coming from the Calgary chapter. Robert will continue that tradition," remarks past Advocis chair Kristan Birchard. "He will bring many positive attributes to the position of chair, the most outstanding of which are vision and leadership."

McCullagh's vision for the Association is long-term, and so when asked about his list of priorities for the year (the length of his term), he hesitates.

"We're working within an ever-moving operation, so my actual capacity or interest to put a stamp on something and say that's my legacy is relatively unimportant and unachievable. I'm

much more interested in seeing how the organization will look five to 10 years from now. Our work today will set the foundation for that," he says.

With the question now reframed to reflect McCullagh's five-to 10-year vision for Advocis, he's ready to answer. He says he would like to build on the success of the Advocis Provincial Advocacy Committees (PACs), which have been instrumental in resolving a number of regulatory matters across the country. He would like to see the day when every member of provincial parliament or legislative assembly (MPP/MLA) and member of Parliament (MP) knows at least *two* Advocis members.

"In a fast-changing industry such as ours, it's important that we have relationships that engage members and legislators in a deep and meaningful way," McCullagh explains. "The reality is that we take care of our families, we take care of our clients — our extended families — and so do the leaders of this country.

"People who are involved as leaders of Advocis are also involved with hospital boards and community associations — they're volunteers who give. I would love for every legislator to know how active we are in helping create the fabric of the community."

McCullagh applauds the efforts of the Advocis regulatory affairs department as it works with regulators to become a part of the discussion on regulatory change.

"We're now being sought after by regulators and legislators for our opinion and our involvement," he says.

In addition to its advocacy initiatives, Advocis remains focused on increasing membership. McCullagh believes that by continuing to provide value in the three key areas of advocacy, education and the Advocis Protective Association (APA), the organization continues to give advisors reasons to join.

"The challenge is in finding the people who value what we do. We need to continue to drive that value proposition," he says.

Last year Advocis and the CLU Institute (now known as "The Institute for Advanced Financial Education") opened up the CLU designation to non-Advocis members. McCullagh sees this as a membership driver for Advocis. There is now a bigger pool of potential CLUs from which to draw new members.

McCullagh also sees the potential for increasing membership through the APA, which offers professional liability insurance to both Advocis members and non-members. On the education side, which comprises the CFP and RHU designations as well as continuing education, he believes there is


also opportunity here to convert non-members to members.

American anthropologist Margaret Mead once said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." McCullagh believes that Advocis has the ability to "change the world," provided the organization thinks with a longer vision, continues to build on its strengths and focuses on the opportunities going forward. This, he says, will benefit both its members and their clients.

"When we use the word 'protection,' it's not just about us — it's about our clients. When we use the word 'integrity,' it's not just about us — it's about the integrity that we bring to our clients. When we use the word 'leadership,' we're talking about how we lead our clients."

"The thing I really admire about Robert," says fellow Advocis board member Randy McGlynn, "is that he is a leader who has a vision and it's one that he articulates clearly on every occasion. He is focused and strategic, and those are the skills that I think will allow him to accomplish his goals and make Advocis a better organization."

Making Advocis a "better organization" is what McCullagh has been doing since he joined the Association 22 years ago.

"For every hour I've given to Advocis, I've received 10 hours of great things back," he says. "There has been so much given back to me as a result of my involvement with Advocis. It's been fabulous." 

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