

PROFILE

He develops a new future after injury.

Robert Morgan's firm employs 1,500 and is a key to downtown's rebound

By THOMAS ADAMS

Robert Morgan was working the cash register at the family's seafood business on Plymouth Avenue, filling in for his dad and making change for a customer, when a man walked quickly toward him, waving a Smith & Wesson .357 Magnum handgun.

It was Jan. 17, 1991.

"This is a store at 4:30 in the afternoon with probably 30 people in the store," says Morgan, now CEO of Morgan Management Inc., which has 1,500 employees. "It's only 1,500 square feet. My mother happened to be at the store. My father wasn't there. I was relieving him. She tried to open the register and it jammed up. This guy is pointing a gun at her. He's pointing a gun at me."

Robert Morgan

Title: CEO, Morgan Management LLC

Age: 52

Home: Pittsford

Education: B.S. in business, Rochester Institute of Technology, 1979

Family: Wife, Robyn; daughter, Lacey, 24; son, Todd, 21

Hobbies: Fast cars, movies, reading, traveling

Quote: "There was a lot of 'Why me?' But there are no answers. God had a reason for this. I was happy to be alive, because every doctor that came in said, 'You're lucky to be here.' When he said that to me, I said, 'I'll take the wheelchair.'"

Indomitable

In the 19 years since a stickup shooting left Robert Morgan in a wheelchair for life, he has built a multimillion-dollar real estate ownership firm with 1,500 employees.

Profile starts on page 10.

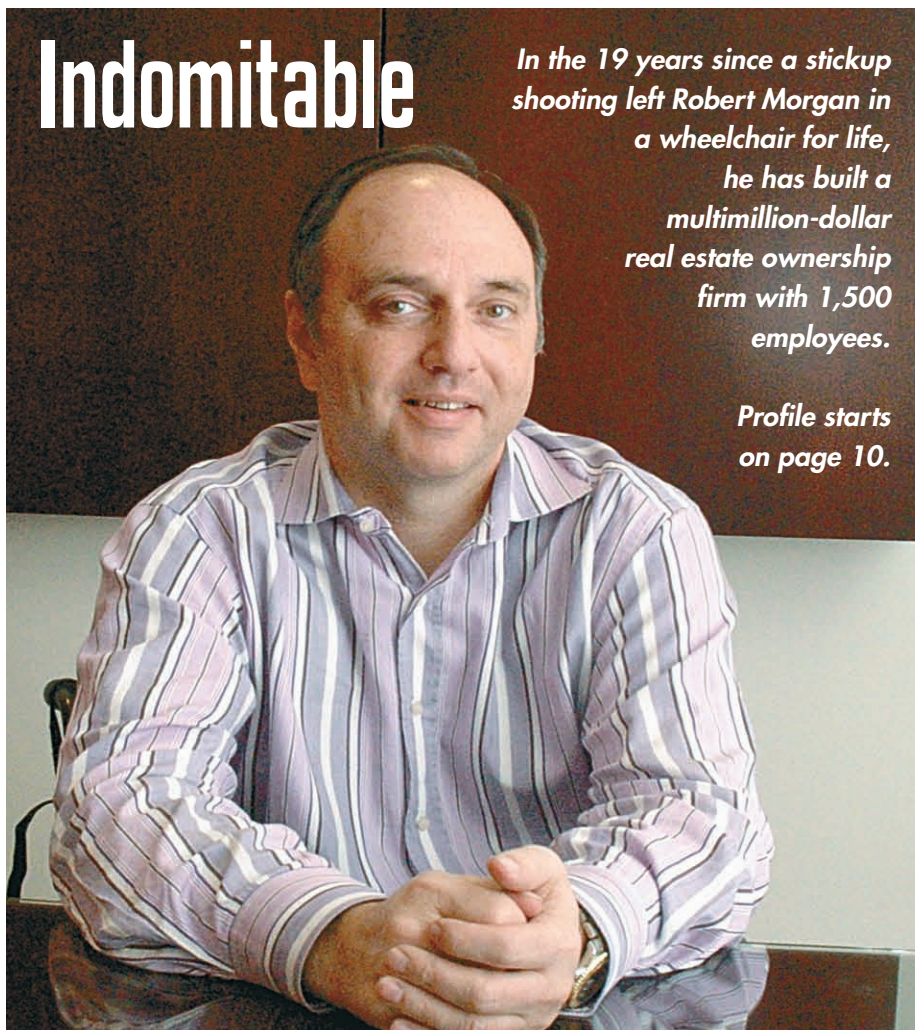


Photo by Kimberly McKinzie

"When you're 33 years old with a wife and two young children ages 5 and 2, a lot of questions come to mind. The first is whether you'll see tomorrow."

The man walked up to Morgan, planted the gun in his back and pulled the trigger. The bullet penetrated Morgan's body and came out the other side, missing his heart by a quarter-inch.

"I didn't know what hit me," he says. "It felt like a grenade went off in my stomach.

"I turned my head to the left and saw this person in my face. I said to myself, 'Oh, no.' I fell on the ground. This person pointed a gun at me and said, 'Get up.'"

The man left soon after, with nothing from the register.

Morgan was rushed to the trauma center at Strong Memorial Hospital. Doctors were not sure he would survive the night.

The shooter?

"They caught him two hours later, on

Genesee Street,” Morgan says. “He was putting a gun to somebody else’s head.”

Morgan underwent surgery and was sedated for six days.

“I wake up,” he says, “and the first thing I see is a doctor looking me in the eyes and telling me I’m going to be in a wheelchair for the rest of my life.”

The bullet damaged Morgan’s spinal cord, leaving him paralyzed from the waist down.

“A lot of things are racing through your mind,” he says. “I was wondering how I was going to make a living when I get out of the hospital. I had just built a new house.”

Morgan has found a way and then some.

He has grown Morgan Management—a company he founded in 1976 after graduating from high school, 15 years before he was shot—into a multimillion-dollar real estate ownership firm with residential and commercial properties stretching from New York to Texas.

“Each one of us looks for inspiration in the world,” says Benjamin Kendig, a Rochester developer and a friend of Morgan.

“Sometimes you find it in the media or in stories of ancestors or whatever. But most often, when you’re lucky, you find it in people that you know. Bob’s life has inspired me a great deal as his friend.”

Morgan, 52, heads the Perinton-based firm. Of his company’s 1,500 employees, 500 are in the Rochester area, including 52 at the headquarters on Route 96, just north of the Ontario County line. In addition to residential and commercial lines, the portfolio includes manufactured housing and a recreational vehicle division.

Morgan’s wife of 26 years, Robyn, is the company’s director of human resources.

“I feel so many different emotions,” she says of her husband. “First, it brings tears to my eyes; I’m so proud to be associated with him. He’s just such an incredible person. He has such a drive and work ethic. He’s so inspiring to so many people every day. He leads our family. He leads our company. He’s just an amazing person.”

Morgan declines to provide specific financial information about his company but says apartments account for half of the revenue.

Morgan RV Resorts, which includes the Indiana Beach Resort amusement park in northwest Indiana, is considered the largest privately owned RV park corporation in the country. It accounts for 30 percent of company earnings. Commercial properties and manufactured housing account for 20 percent.

Morgan Management includes more than 200 properties or businesses as separate limited liability companies.

But Morgan could not imagine any of that as he lay on the floor of the Morgan Fish Co., pain searing through him.

Getting started

Morgan had dabbled in real estate for 15 years after founding Morgan Management and buying a two-family house on Overdale Park near Monroe Avenue for \$18,000. He flipped it a year later for \$42,000.

“The person I flipped it to two years later flipped it for \$90,000,” Morgan says. “I thought I did real well, but this other person actually did better.”

He bought a few more two-family homes, then expanded with the purchase of small neighborhood shopping centers, the first of which was the North Park Plaza at Portland Avenue and Norton Street in the early 1980s.

Then he cut franchise deals for a CVS Caremark Inc. pharmacy, a Convenient Market & Deli at Portland Avenue and Norton Street, and some Pizza Hut restaurants and Family Dollar stores.

But real estate was his second job.

“This (seafood) business was how I was making a living,” Morgan says. “I wasn’t taking a dime out of the real estate. I was using that money to expand more into real estate.”

All that changed after the shooting.

“I’m the kind of person that was working 70 or 80 hours a week, six to seven days a week,” he says. “When I wasn’t working for the seafood company, I was taking care of real estate and doing other things. I was a hands-on guy.

“I was going 100 miles an hour and hit a wall, and everything stopped. It just blew my mind. It was very difficult to comprehend. But I was in so much pain I just thought, well, I’ll deal with that in a minute. I just wanted to get through the pain.”

Morgan spent three months in rehabilitation at the University of Rochester Medical Center, followed by two months of rehab at a facility in Scranton, Pa. And more rehab at his home in Pittsford.

“I was just so happy that he survived that morning after,” Robyn says. “I didn’t even know what a spinal cord injury was. We had two small children, so my first focus was that he was alive and still with us.

“After we realized what the impact the gunshot wound had on him physically, we just focused on rehab and moving forward with our lives, and just keeping our children’s lives as normal as possible. We felt we were in turmoil. But we just said this is going to be our new life. We were just going to make the best of it.”

The family sold Morgan Fish, which does

business as the King Fish Market, 13 weeks after the shooting. Morgan had worked there for 18 years, starting as a 15-year-old.

“We had to sell the company because my parents were a lot older than me,” Morgan says. “I kind of ran the company. We had a wholesale division and a retail division. We just decided we couldn’t operate it anymore.”

Focus on real estate

Real estate would become his primary source of income.

“There was money coming in from real estate, but not enough to basically support my parents and myself,” Morgan says.

In 1992, he entered the mobile home park business after researching it and deciding there was a lack of competition.

“I bought my first two mobile home parks, in Binghamton,” he says. “That was a \$2.5 million transaction. It was a big deal for me back then, and a big deal today.”

It was a big deal, he says, because it set the course for his professional future.

Morgan bought 8,000 manufactured housing units and mobile home parks from 1992 to 1998. Then he decided to get into the RV business.

“We just decided there weren’t a lot of great deals out there in the mobile home industry because of all the competition that came in,” he says. “We’re always trying to find businesses that we can jump into that have a lot of upside.”

Morgan Management bought some 40 RV parks in 1998 and 1999.

The company bought 5,000 apartment units from 1999 to 2004, Morgan says, and now has 14,000 units in five states.

“Instead of the myriad of attitudes that he could choose to deal with his life, he maintains a very upbeat compartment,” Kendig says of Morgan. “He works, and he works at stuff that he can work at. It doesn’t cloud his future.

“To get to know that about him, and watch him in action, is very inspirational. We all have hard times in our lives. It’s not what happens to you; it’s how you deal with it. That attitude has made him quite successful.”

Morgan’s company manages 7,000 apartments in the Rochester market, some in partnership with Frontier Management of New York Inc. and its owner, Richard Chiarenza.

Locally, Morgan Management and two partners paid Home Properties Inc. \$252 million in 2006 for its Upstate New York portfolio of 18 properties, divvying up 4,500 units. It bought 800 apartments from Natapow Realty Corp. and 1,000 from Costanza Enterprises Inc.

"We look for 200 units or more, garden-style apartments," Morgan says. "Most of the stuff we buy are C-plus to B apartments. We like to buy C-plus apartments and fix them up into Bs. We create more value doing that."

Morgan Management also is building some 1,000 units in the Victor-Farmington area of Ontario County, Morgan says.

"We're trying to grow at between 10 and 15 percent a year," he says. "It depends on the acquisitions that come up. New construction is probably 10 percent of the apartment portfolio. ... We build a few projects every year."

Many projects

Morgan Management's latest endeavor is its partnership with the National Association of Stock Car Auto Racing Inc. in NASCAR RV Resorts. The plan is to open 13 campgrounds in eight states in May, each having television screens 20 feet square to show that week's races.

"I think it's going to be a nice venture for us," Morgan says. "It's getting into the franchise business. It's looking to be a very substantial part of the company. It could evolve into being the biggest part of the whole company."

Morgan Management has increased its profile locally in recent years, first with its acquisition of the Canal Ponds Office Park in Greece and, most recently, with its partnership with Christa Development Corp. to tackle the rehabilitation of Midtown Tower and the development of a city-owned parking lot on East Main Street.

Its interest in Canal Ponds came about as Morgan Management searched for a location for a BJ's Wholesale Club store.

"We had BJ's on the hook that wanted to go in there," Morgan says. "They actually wanted to go on the corner of Ridgeway and Long Pond, and there were some environmental problems. We had that site tied up, about 10 acres. We ended up talking them into where they are now."

Morgan Management bought Canal Ponds' 90 acres from the town of Greece for \$3.4 million after Eastman Kodak Co. donated the vacant land to the town. It eventually sold the BJ's site to a real estate division of UBS AG, which is based in Zurich, Switzerland, but it still owns the surrounding land.

"We have approvals for retail space out there," he says. "We're talking to some people for office. It's a slower market right now, but it's one of the nicest business parks in town."

Morgan Management's interest in Midtown Tower resulted from Morgan's friendship with Christa Development CEO

David Christa.

"He's into construction big-time, and I'm into multifamily management," Morgan says. "We manage a lot of units and both have great teams, and we get along very well. I've known Dave for about seven or eight years. We've talked about doing things together. This is the first thing we're doing together."

The partnership has proposed commercial space on the first three floors of the 17-story building, 186 apartments on floors four through 13, and 24 condominiums on the top floors.

"Our goal is to do a lot downtown," Morgan says. "Downtown has been stagnant for a long time. We feel that doing this Midtown building will bring a lot of life back into it. We see a big future with this building."

"We're getting interest from people who are calling us and asking about condos and things like that. We're getting calls on the office space."

Morgan Management most recently thrust itself into the city's attempt to bring a new theater to the Midtown block.

"At first I thought we weren't going to be involved in it, but we are to some extent now," Morgan says. "We're basically helping the city. We're not sure what our role is yet. We're just trying to push this location towards the Midtown site because it actually helps us out. We're putting the tower up, and (a possible theater) helps develop that whole site."

The Christa-Morgan partnership also wants to develop a city-owned parking lot at 420 E. Main St. with DeWolff Partnership Architects LLP.

"We're looking at some other parcels downtown," Morgan says. "We'd like to develop that whole corridor as we get in there. There are some other things that we're going to be doing down there that will be as good as the Midtown building."

"It's that whole big block, where Midtown is and along Court Street. We think there's a lot of potential there. They have to clean some things there, but we think there's a lot of potential."

Personal efforts

Morgan's most personal endeavor, perhaps, is Morgan Management's involvement in Castle Office Group LLC, which partnered with the UR medical center to build the ambulatory surgery center that opened last summer.

Morgan was asked in January 2009 to join the medical center's board of directors by CEO Bradford Berk.

"I'm working with the University of Rochester now on different projects," Mor-

gan says. "I said I'd love to give back to the board, because the reason I'm here is because when I got injured, I was at the trauma center 15 minutes after the shooting. That's what saved my life."

Morgan often speaks to people confined to wheelchairs about the problems they face.

"This injury puts you under an enormous amount of pressure," he says. "You're frustrated. You can't move sometimes, depending on how you're injured. You have to be able to ask for help when you need help, and I was never that type of person."

It took Morgan one year to get used to a wheelchair and its impacts.

"There was running into a door, getting caught in a step, going into a building that doesn't have an elevator," he says. "There are a lot of obstacles you have to go through."

"It's not even about somebody telling you you're going to be in a wheelchair, but all the after-effects of being a paraplegic or a quadriplegic. You have to worry about pressure sores, about infections."

The family home in Pittsford is now wheelchair-accessible throughout.

"It was a major life change, but we did not interrupt our kids' lives," Robyn says. "We also had a lot of family support, too. We equipped our home. We put a chair glide in so he could get up to the second floor."

"My kids just grew up thinking that this was normal. They knew that every father wasn't handicapped, but it was just known to them that this was their dad. And they really never knew the severity of the injury until years later, when we actually sat down and talked to them about it."

Their daughter, Lacey, 24, lives in New York City. Their son, Todd, 21, is a junior at Nazareth College of Rochester and works part-time at Morgan Management.

The gunman, Michael Ramsey, was convicted of attempted murder and sentenced to 55 years in prison. He will be eligible for parole in 13 years.

Ramsey was a third-time felon who had been released six weeks prior to shooting Morgan after serving time for armed robbery. Morgan identified the gunman in court and testified against him.

"Do I hate the guy? I don't like the guy, but you have to move on," Morgan says. "Is he paying his price 100 percent for what he's put me through? I don't think so. But there's nothing I can do about it. Hopefully, they'll keep him in jail. When his parole comes up, we'll do what we have to do to keep him in jail."

Off the job

Morgan Management's involvement with NASCAR fits with one of Morgan's

interests away from work.

"I do like fast cars," he says. "I have two cars I play around with, sports cars. That's my passion. I have a Porsche turbo that I put a chip into it and a new exhaust system and different wheels. I beef it all up and make it go faster. I don't know for what. Not that I'm going racing anyplace."

He does plan to attend some NASCAR races.

"Now that we've signed this NASCAR deal, I'll probably be going to a lot of races. That'll be fun, and it's something I've always wanted to do anyway.

"I learned about NASCAR when I was

in the hospital. I had a surgery and was in the hospital for a month, on my back. I had nothing to do but watch TV. I was watching the races and got hooked on it."

Morgan's other pastimes include reading, going to movies with Robyn and going to New York City every three months to visit Lacey.

"'The Art of the Deal' is one of my favorite books," he says. "I like to read things that are related to what I do every day."

All things considered, Morgan says, life has worked out for the best.

"The seafood business was a business I kind of hated because I worked so many

hours that I never saw my family," he says. "I never saw my kids.

"I'm not saying this is the way I wanted to go into this business, but after I got injured and said I'm going into real estate full time, I was very excited about doing it because it's something I love."

The King Fish Market still operates on Plymouth Avenue.

"I was taken out on a stretcher, and I never looked back," Morgan says. "I've never driven down the street. I've never gone in the area. And this is a place that I've put 60 or 70 percent of my life into."

tadams@rbj.net / 585-546-8303