



A Plan For Your Wealth and Life

A Q&A with Carla Wigen, CPA, J.D.



CARLA C. WIGEN
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For Carla Wigen, effective wealth management is built on conversations that matter, not just numbers. That means keeping the dialogue open with clients and their families at all times, so their needs and concerns shape financial plans and strategies – instead of the other way around. With nearly two decades of experience in the financial services industry, Carla recently joined LNWM as Managing Director of Fiduciary Strategy. We sat down with Carla to talk about what it means to serve clients really well.

Carla, what is unique to wealth management in the Pacific Northwest?

Carla: Just as the Pacific Northwest has changed dramatically since the 1980s, so has the type of wealth found here. There also tends to be more concentration. People might have most of their net worth tied up in the business they own, or real estate, or stock options, or intellectual property. Each situation requires different strategies in using those assets to accomplish what the owners want.

Also, many people now own assets in multiple states and even outside the US. So you have to navigate the different tax laws and regulations on income, asset sales and estates. Finally, I think there's greater interest in socially aware investing, impact investing and philanthropy in our region.

How can families succeed in sustaining multi-generational wealth?

Carla: There are many different types of structures that can be put in place for the benefit of current and future generations. We can work with LLCs (Limited Liability Companies) to transfer wealth. Or we can also accomplish multiple goals using a trust, given the big variety in trust structures.

The challenge is knowing what would work best given the assets, goals, values and personalities unique to each family. You can structurally arrange to transfer wealth, but it won't work if the foundation is not in place for that to actually happen. By foundation, I mean taking fully into account what the family values, what its goals are, the different personalities, and the dynamics among family members.

LNWM has a long history as advisor to families, including the Lairds and the Nortons, now in their seventh generation as successful business owners. So there is a lot of institutional knowledge here about what works well (and not so well) for particular situations.

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Most important as we strategize about multi-generational wealth is communication and educating the younger generations so that they are financially responsible. This is another thing we work on and strategize about. Having a young person as a co-trustee, for example, is one approach that might work well for a particular family.

How can younger high-net-worth individuals or families get started on building multigenerational wealth?

Carla: Many younger professionals in their 30s and 40s, especially those who have had some early success, are now in their prime earning years. My advice to them would be to step back and allow yourself some time to think longer-term: what big plans do you have for the future? How do you want to share the wealth you're building with your family? How much is enough, and what happens when you get there?

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The other thing is to see your assets in their entirety, including even your own skills and abilities, and put a plan in place that has built-in diversification, risk management, and the structures and strategies you need to fund your various goals. It is tempting – and easy — to think that you're keeping all your options open by not committing to any planning. But in fact the opposite is true.

Without financial guidance, you're more likely to veer toward whatever your personal financial biases may be. Perhaps you're overspending and will look back with regret. Or maybe you're being too conservative. Having a financial plan in place lets you use all the tools available to calibrate your financial situation in context of what you value and want to do. Even if your goals change, the result is more options and fewer regrets later in life.

What questions would you want clients to ask a wealth management firm?

Carla: There are certain basic things clients should always ask: how are my advisors paid and do they get incentives to recommend some financial products over others? Is the firm a fiduciary, required by law to give advice that is in the client's best interest? What is the total fee charged and what does this include?

Beyond that, clients should feel very comfortable asking any and all questions about their finances and portfolios. It is these questions that open up conversations and allow us to provide clients with peace of mind, which I think is the ultimate goal of wealth management.

Why did you join Laird Norton Wealth Management?

Carla: It's one of the rare, fully integrated wealth management firms in the country that understands how families operate and what families need. LNWM has been working with clients' trusts and investments for over 50 years. I get to work on every aspect of our clients' financial lives with experts just down the hall, not in some office across the country. That's a huge benefit to our clients and it's not common in this industry.

Second, I've known, worked with, and been impressed by many of the people at LNWM for years. For example, Kristi Mathisen [LNWM's Managing Director of Tax and Financial Planning]; her depth of knowledge is astounding. Creating wealth usually comes from a single-minded pursuit, but managing wealth requires widespread expertise. It is quite difficult to excel at all the different aspects of managing wealth and also integrate them. I think LNWM does that.

Finally, and most importantly for me, Laird Norton Wealth Management's clients. They represent the diversity of what makes the Pacific Northwest so unique and so dynamic.

How does your background shape how you approach wealth management?

Carla: To this day, I remember how my father, a soybean farmer in Ripley, Tennessee responded when I was a child and said something like "Oh that person is so weird." He said: "Everyone is weird in their own way, including YOU." What I've taken away from that is that not every idea or financial strategy is best for every person. Each individual has their own ideas of how they want to use their resources. The key is working through what it is that people really desire in regard to their wealth and helping put together the strategy that will best help them get there.

In my earlier years, I was a serious softball player, and that's when I first learned about the dynamics of teamwork and succeeding as a team. More recently, I've experienced the rewards of discipline and focus while training for and running a 50-kilometer trail ultra-marathon near Mt. Adams. Not only do I get such joy from being on the trails, but trail running has taught me to keep things in perspective and think long-term.



Carla Wigen at "Big Foot" trail run, August 2018.

How has wealth management changed since you started working in this field?

Carla: Thanks to tech advances, at LNWM we are now able to show clients how their financial plan is performing, how sustainable their spending is, how on track they are to fund all their goals within ranges of probability. The same with risk management; at LNWM, we can run simulations that show how portfolios are likely to perform in all sorts of market scenarios. There are also more investment options for high-net-worth clients, including for example, private equity funds that offer the possibility of higher returns if you can keep your money invested for years at a time. And the opportunities are global.

What hasn't changed? The need for strategic investing and planning that is based on each client's unique combination of assets and aspirations.



How will you fit in with LNWM's top management and its fiduciary services?

Carla: As a CPA, I have an obvious love of numbers, but what really gives me energy is conversations with people and being part of a team. The great thing about working at LNWM is that there's a great deal of teamwork, and the teamwork is collegial. This allows for open exploration and sometimes tough conversations, where expert opinions might be at odds. But this is how we arrive at solutions for clients that work really well over time, not just temporary fixes that have to be undone at sometimes great cost.

What do you hope to accomplish working at LNWM?

Carla: One thing really: If you, your family, your business associates or your friends need help with your financial situation (wealth management) I want Laird Norton Wealth Management to be the first place you think to call. I'm excited to be part of the great work LNWM is doing for clients and their families and to having those key conversations with clients about their life and aspirations, which form the basis of our work. ▣

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CARLA C. WIGEN is managing director of fiduciary strategy at Laird Norton Wealth Management. She has nearly 20 years of experience in wealth management and private banking, focused on trusts and estate planning. At LNWM, Carla is responsible for developing strategies to expand LNWM's fiduciary operations, including new client acquisition and retention, analyzing new market segments and opportunities, and helping to evolve services to meet the changing needs of our clients. Carla earned a Juris Doctorate at the Seattle University School of Law and a Master's of Law at the University of WA School of Law. She has a Bachelor's in Business Administration from the University of WA and is a Certified Public Accountant.

ABOUT LAIRD NORTON WEALTH MANAGEMENT

With nearly \$5 billion in assets under advisement, Laird Norton Wealth Management is the Northwest's premier wealth management company. Founded in 1967 to serve the financial management needs of the Laird and Norton families, the firm now provides integrated wealth management solutions to more than 600 individuals, families, business leaders, private foundations and nonprofit organizations.

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