

4D BUSINESS

Frank Reddy
Reporter
770-535-6324
freddy@gainesvilletimes.com


facebook.com/
gainesvilletimes


twitter.com/
gtimes

times 
gainesvilletimes.com/
alerts

The Times
gainesvilletimes.com
★ Sunday, July 12, 2015

'Time to think' pays off



Photos by SCOTT ROGERS | The Times

Willis Investment Counsel President, CEO and CIO Bob Willis spends much of his day on his feet conducting research on a pair of computer screens. Recently the Gainesville investment firm made a prestigious London Times list of investment firms.

Small-town edge helps Willis make elite list

By Frank Reddy
freddy@gainesvilletimes.com

Inside the conference room of his Gainesville office, Bob Willis is snapping his fingers.

Seated at the head of the table and surrounded by colleagues, he's trying to illustrate what sets his investment management firm apart from those big city operations. Before him on the conference table, there's a faded photo from the 1970s. It's a picture of a gas station.

"(In Wall Street) you got this pressure on you to close this deal, close that deal, change strategies — snap-snap-snap-snap — 'always be moving.'"

Here in Gainesville, Willis explains, "you have time to read and think. You're not inundated with all that jazz."

Having started 36 years ago in Bainbridge, Willis Investment Counsel has grown over the years. As the largest independent investment management firm north of metro Atlanta, WIC manages about \$1.6 billion in assets for clients across the country.

Others have taken note.

Staff of the firm recently learned they'd been named to the Financial Times' list of the top registered investment advisers in the United States.

The London-based international business publication placed Willis Investment Counsel as one of 300 investment firms in the country on the "FT 300 Top Registered Investment Advisers" list.

Of the 13 Georgia firms named to the list, WIC was one of only two not located in Atlanta and the only such firm north of metro Atlanta.

Throughout the entire list, most of those who made the cut were headquartered in big cities — Atlanta, Chicago, San Francisco, New York, Seattle and so on.

But Willis, a charter financial analyst and chief investment officer at the firm, said Gainesville has been good to him.

"Over the years I would have colleagues ask me 'How in the hell do you think you're going to grow your firm and attract really good talent to Gainesville? You have to be located in Atlanta,'" Willis said.

"I've always resisted that notion," he said, gesturing toward two colleagues across the table. "I think these two will readily agree."

One of the two, Principal and Portfolio Manager Jay Kilroy, called it "geographic advantage."

Prior to coming to Gainesville, Kilroy worked for Wall Street firms where "you were just constantly inundated with research and information all day long. Emails, phone calls, there's never any time for clarity of thought."

"So, one of the advantages of this set-



WILLIS INVESTMENT COUNSEL

ting in Gainesville is that it's the perfect environment for clarity of thought. We have the ability to make more rational decisions. We can think about our clients' positioning, rather than feed into the noise of the day," Kilroy said.

He found out about the firm, at 710 Green St., because of its reputation and moved here several years ago.

"The client retention of this firm was remarkable. It was based on decades of trust," Kilroy said. "That was something we had never seen replicated in New York and Washington."

Brett Slattery, a charter financial analyst and portfolio manager for the local firm, agreed. Before coming to Gainesville, he worked with Kilroy at one of those big city firms.

Slattery said the firm's inclusion in the Financial Times list was "further validation" Willis Investment Counsel "had a reputation for excellence."

That reputation, Willis said, comes from a very simple philosophy: "We have clients, not accounts."



Willis Investment Counsel was founded in this Bainbridge gas station. Founder Bob Willis has kept the photo for 36 years.



Robert T. Willis, center, President, CEO and CIO, meets with Vice President Operations and Trading, Chief Compliance Officer Kelli M. Wright, and Portfolio Managers Brett T. Slattery, right, and James J. Kilroy.

Willis said the firm takes the time to get to know its clients, which are located all over the country.

"That's always been the philosophy, from the start," Willis said.

With his index finger, Willis pushes the photo toward the center of the table. The print's rounded corners, its washed-out tones, spark vivid memories — like a core sample drilled from his past.

He bought the gas station pictured in the photo when he was 22 years old. When he was 24, Willis decided to turn it into an office. Located in downtown Bainbridge, he recalls they "bricked it up and converted it into a decent little office building."

Kilroy loves that anecdote.

"It's such a cool part of the history here," he said. "Humble beginnings in the gas station."

At this, Willis gestures toward Kilroy and Slattery. "These two guys, they didn't come down here in spite of Gainesville. No, quite the opposite. Coming to Gainesville was the draw."

And, truth be told, Willis never did care for city life.

"I didn't like the big city, and I didn't want to go back down south (to Bainbridge) and battle the gnats, so here I came."



WILLIS INVESTMENT COUNSEL

Principled Investing

710 Green Street | Gainesville, GA 30501 | Phone: 770.718.0706 | Fax: 770.718.08 | www.wicinvest.com