

Let's talk about that title, "The Most Tax-Efficient Man in America." How did that come about?

I wasn't keen on that title, actually [laughs]. But here's *The Wall Street Journal* writing about some CPA from New Jersey—already you're off to a bad start, because it doesn't get any duller than a CPA from New Jersey—but they were looking for a way to get readers interested in this tongue-in-cheek, front-page article. And they said, "What do you do that's different?" Well, I get a W-2 from Monmouth, and I get benefits. I used to pay for my own health and life insurance. All pension money came directly from me. But as a full-time employee of the University, those things are now covered. I even get a 10 percent discount at the bookstore and free tickets to football games.

Then, on the side, I have Doug Stives LLC, which is my vehicle for teaching continuing education classes across the country. For that work I get a 1099. So I told [the *Journal*] it's the best of both worlds. I get benefits from the college side and then deduct on my tax return things like my *Wall Street Journal* subscription, my computer, Wi-Fi, my cellphone, continuing education, and some travel expenses. You can't do that as an employee. They twisted it around in journalistic fashion—which I admire—and came up with the title.

That article says you "use the tax code's many quirks" as the means through which you "can live a fuller life." How so?

Tax laws are complicated by their nature. Congress writes them—and Congress can't do anything without complicating it. As a professor, I know what you can do—not what you can get away with—what you can do to reduce your taxes *legally*. I'd be a fool not to take advantage of those things. And the more you do it, the bet-

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ter you get at it. I'm careful. I know what records I need, and I know what to back up and what will survive an audit.

The article also mentions "the flurry of tiny deductions that add up," explaining how you write off things like allowable mileage and food expenses on business trips—even down to a hot dog you bought at the airport. Are there things the average person doesn't understand about deductions?

Deductions can be very beneficial. However, one of the things I'm constantly telling my students is that just because you can deduct it from your taxes doesn't make it free. There's so much misinformation out there. You have people who brag about being in the top tax bracket or who brag about not paying any taxes at all. That tells you a lot about a person.

Also, some people think that because they work from home, they can deduct part of their house. Well, no, there are very strict rules about that. People are doing stuff they shouldn't, sometimes intentionally and sometimes because they lack information.

This is the first year that people are filing under the new tax law. What should the average filer know heading into this season?

For a lot of people, tax returns are simple. They get a W-2, and unless they are afraid of computers, they get a software program and file that way. By the way, don't *ever* do your return by hand. That's stupidity.

As for the new law, a lot of people won't itemize deductions this year. Many people are reverting to standard deductions. And if you don't have more than \$24,000 (for married taxpayers) in deductions, there's not a whole lot you need to know.

What about someone whose return might be a little more complicated?

If you have investments, a business, or rental properties, then you *really* need professional help from a CPA. And you need to meet with that person one-on-one. Unfortunately our profession has morphed into just scanning your W-2 and other forms. Then the accountant processes your return and sends it back to you for filing. Don't do it that way. You don't call a doctor and just tell him what's wrong over the phone, right? When it comes to finding an accountant, you have to insist on some kind of personal meeting, at least the first time.

People should also be aware of the new Qualified Business Income deduction, which, if you have your own business—within certain parameters—you won't pay taxes on 20 percent of what you make. This law simplified taxes for a lot of people but made it unnecessarily complicated for others. But we don't have nearly enough time to get into all of those complications [laughs]!

Any other tips?

If you hear from the IRS, get professional help before you respond. The IRS is not the Middletown police. They don't read you Miranda rights. You open your mouth, say the wrong thing, and you could go to jail.

What do the next few years look like for you?

More of the same wonderful stuff, really. I know it can't go on forever. I've tragically seen people who don't know when to quit, and I don't want that to happen to me. My memory is not as good as it used to be. I need more sleep. My hearing is terrible. My eyesight's bad [laughs]. I think I'll give myself another four or five years in the classroom. But I still like to ski and sail. The last thing I'll ever do is sit around screaming at the television. But right now I am just exceedingly happy doing what I'm doing. 

EXPLAIN THIS »

Answering your burning questions

HOW CAN I PRESERVE MY FAMILY'S HISTORY?

It's a familiar scene for so many today—basements full of old photo albums, attics overflowing with home movies, smartphones bursting at the seams with selfies and videos. Chaotic? Sure. But put them together, and what you have is valuable family history. "Whether you're preserving your family's stories to pass down to your children, or you're planning to donate your photos or keepsakes in some way, all of these stories make up a narrative worth saving," says Melissa Ziobro, a specialist professor of public history. But how to do that?

When it comes to paper documents like photos, keep them comfortable. "Most of these family collections get stored in the basement or attic because that's where there's room," says Ziobro. "But these are the worst possible places for them" since there is minimal control over temperature and humidity. A good rule of thumb, she says: "If you wouldn't be comfortable in your basement or attic, the documents aren't comfortable either." Also, it's best not to use paper clips or staples, which can rust and destroy the documents over time. Instead, use acid-free

folders and papers, and keep the documents as flat as possible to avoid putting any unwarranted stress on them.

In addition to storing the original copies properly, Ziobro recommends investing in an inexpensive scanner to create digital versions. Just be sure to capture a high-resolution image—one that is at least 300 dots per inch, and possibly 600 dpi if the scanner is capable.

For images born digital—smartphone photos, for example—Ziobro recommends printing *and* backing up the images in the cloud or on a thumb drive. "Have as many different versions as you can," she says. "This goes for printed and digital files."

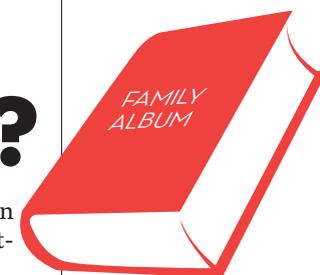
And while images and documents can tell a valuable story, Ziobro says we shouldn't underestimate the value of the spoken word. Collecting oral histories can be a fun and informative way to make the past accessible for future generations. "It's so much more relatable because we're hearing from people in their own words and cadence," she says. "And since we're hear-

ing from people who aren't in the history books, we're getting different perspectives."

The good news is that it's easy to get started capturing your family members' personal histories. Chances are you already have an app on your smartphone that can record crystal-clear audio. Ziobro says it's best to start simple. "Even if I'm interviewing grandpa about his Korean War service, it can be hard to jump right in there," she says. "Start at the beginning with 'When and where were you born?' It's a simple question and sets the context for the interview."

Oral histories, photos, and videos make great family keepsakes, but Ziobro encourages families to share them with museums, historical societies, and oral history archivists. "People tend to be humble and think that no one cares about their story, but that's just not the case," she says. "We want to know what the average person in New Jersey was doing during World War II. The only way to get that is to hear these 'average' stories."

—Melissa Kvidahl Reilly



THE 10-SECOND BONUS QUESTION

WHAT'S WORTH DONATING?

A national organization may be interested in military uniforms, while local groups would love to preserve a scrapbook of memories from the neighborhood. Many archivists welcome recordings or interviews.

To ask a question of our faculty experts, email magazine@monmouth.edu, or mail Explain This, Monmouth magazine, Alumni House, 400 Cedar Ave., West Long Branch, NJ 07764.