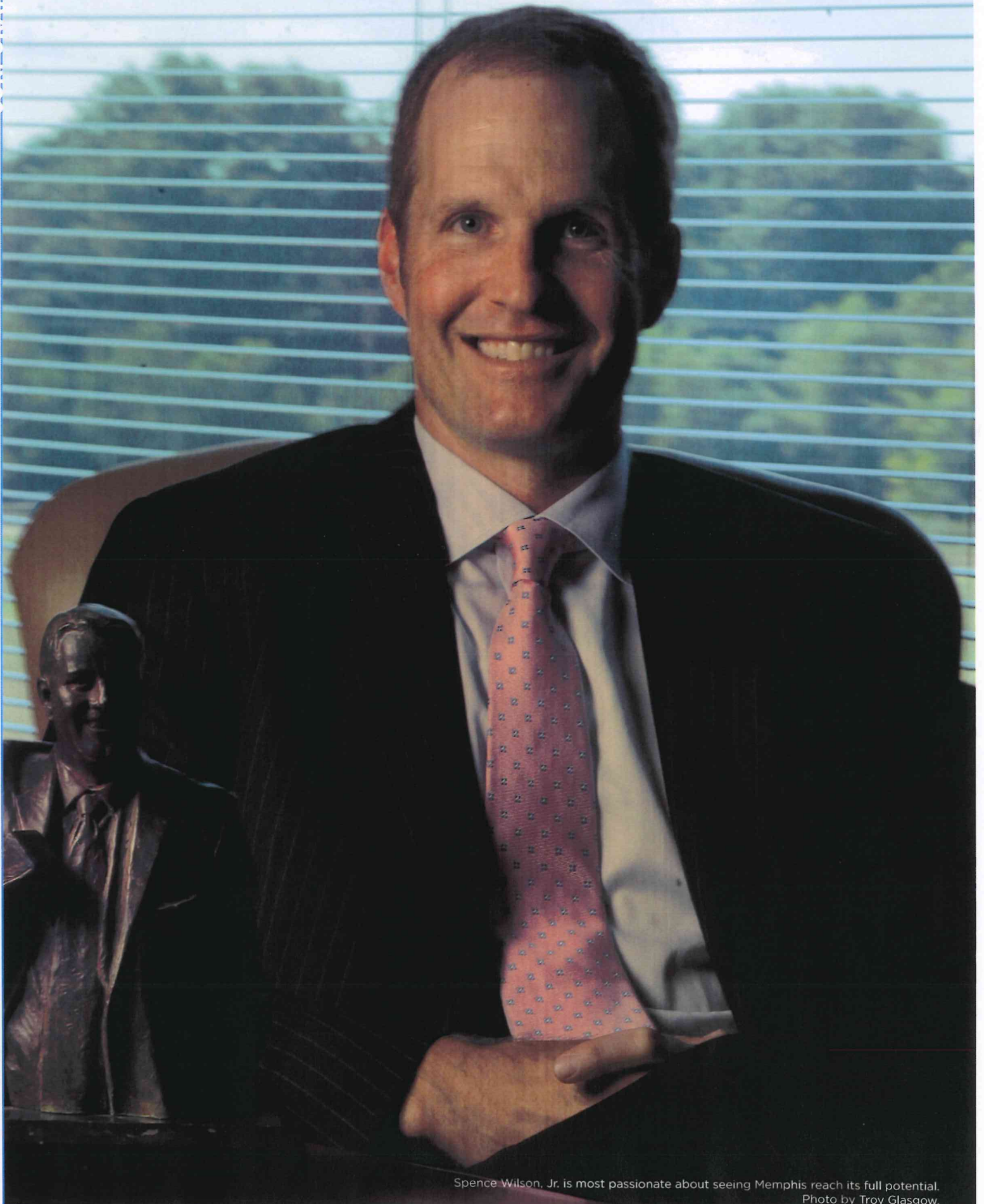


 **THE CORNER OFFICE**



Spence Wilson, Jr. is most passionate about seeing Memphis reach its full potential.
Photo by Troy Glasgow.

A Passion for MEMPHIS

by ERINN FIGG

Passion is the common thread that runs through almost every aspect of Spence Wilson Jr.'s life, from his business decisions to his personal beliefs to the way he feels about Memphis.

Wilson is vice president of Kemmons Wilson Companies, founded by his grandfather in 1948 and best known for revolutionizing America's hotel industry with the creation of the iconic Holiday Inn brand. Today, Wilson works closely with his father, Spence, two uncles, Bob and Kem Jr as well as his brother, Webb, and two first cousins, Kem III and McLean. The company owns and operates a diverse collection of businesses in a wide range of industries, including resort timesharing, hospitality, aviation, real estate, financial services and insurance.

One area of focus is their timeshare resort business, Orange Lake Resorts, which he works with his father to oversee. Interestingly, the family formed a strategic alliance with Holiday Inns in 2008 to create a new brand, Holiday Inn Club Vacations. The family couldn't be prouder to see two companies founded by Kemmons come together. Wilson is also responsible for identifying and recommending new investment opportunities. While he says these decisions are strongly based on metrics, sometimes cash flow alone doesn't cut it.

"We've got so many different businesses and industries in our portfolio, and we discovered a common theme that has really emerged among the successful ones: competence is key but what we're really looking for is passion," he said. "When you find those people who have essentially found their calling, you'll find that those are the ones who are truly successful. It takes passion to pull down business obstacles and roadblocks. You have to really love what you do."

Wilson himself went through a period of soul-searching to discover his own passion. He knew he wanted to eventually join the family business; he just wasn't sure what that role would be. It's a rule in his family that each person needs to get work experience outside Kemmons Wilson Companies before coming on board, so Wilson worked odd jobs before receiving his Bachelor of Science in commerce and business administration from the University of Alabama in 1992. He then worked at a bank before starting his Kemmons Wilson career in 1995. He earned his MBA from University of Memphis in 2001.

Wilson discovered he was energized by the concept of helping businesses make comebacks.

"I was really attracted to the turnaround. When you get into a business and see potential, you have to reignite it, turn it around and re-craft the vision," he said. "It's a lot of hard work, but it helped me get a real understanding of the ins and outs of business."

Aside from the teachings of his grandfather and father, he also credits the New Memphis Institute Fellows Program as a source of inspiration.

"They help you peel back the onion on yourself, so to speak, to help you identify your inherent strengths and talents then connect you with community initiatives," he said. "The experience really got me to refocus my efforts both personally and professionally."

Part of that refocus centered on the impact he wanted to make in his community.

"The thing I'm most passionate about is seeing Memphis achieve its full potential one day. There's no reason why we can't be considered one of the Top 10 cities in the United States. But to get there, it's going to require continued positive change," said Wilson, who lives in the Mid-South with his wife, Stephanie, and children, Olivia and Spence III.

"We've got this tremendous opportunity to move forward," he said. "It will take everyone in this community working together towards a common vision." "And, along the way, we've just got make sure we stay authentic and true to ourselves."

He's excited about the potential to make this progress happen as a Co-Chairman of the Greater Memphis Chamber's Chairman's Circle.

"Initially we'll be a group of 100 businesses whose representatives are passionate about this city. They are choosing to jump in the game and do what we can to make sure Memphis remains a viable, competitive and successful city for years to come."

Wilson's colleague and fellow Kemmons Wilson vice president Cecil Carney III believes the initiative is a perfect fit for Wilson.

"He cares about where we want to go as a city," Carney said. "He's passionate about Memphis and making Memphis a better place, and that really comes from his upbringing. His family has always been dedicated to taking their successes and giving back to the community."



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