

# Global chair man

By [Rich Polikoff](#)

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Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/WILLIAM MOORE Noel Morris Monday, June 18, 2012 at the Holiday Inn in Springdale. For profiles, primary.

• SPRINGDALE — SELF PORTRAIT

**Date and place of birth:**

March 9, 1948, in Russellville

**Family:**

wife Sandy, sons Parker and Drew, 1 grandchild

**Notable for:**

Organizing the charitable distribution of more than 7,000 wheelchairs worldwide

**The best financial advice I give students is**

“read the fine print.”

**I'd be a better golfer if**

I would control the six inches between my ears better.

**Something I do almost every day is**

physical activity.

**Five years from now, I'd like to be**

taking extended sailing vacations.

**The thing I like most about sailing is**

being able to adjust the set of your sails as conditions change on the water.

**Someone I admire is**

[UA] professor Dub Ashton, for his positive attitude in the face of medical challenges.

**If I could learn something new, it would be**

more about horses.

**The last great movie I saw was**

The Help.

**Something people would be surprised to learn about me is**

on shuffle, my iPod might go from Verdi, to Flatt and Scruggs, to Aaron Copland.

**A phrase to sum me up:**

G.O.P., goal-oriented person

It's people like Javier who push Noel Morris to do more.

Morris met Javier in the spring of 2003 in a town plaza in Tepic, a city in western Mexico. Morris was the leader of a group of two dozen people from Northwest Arkansas who had flown to Puerto Vallarta, then endured a grueling four-hour bus ride to Tepic.

The group, which Morris had organized through his role as the president of the Rotary Club of Springdale, was in Mexico to distribute wheelchairs to people who could not afford them. A Rotary Club in Mexico had put together a list of people who needed wheelchairs, and the plan was for the Springdale group to distribute them at the town plaza.

"It is almost a life-changing experience," says Rick Barrows of Springdale, a fellow Rotarian who has accompanied Morris on four wheelchair-distribution trips. "The look of appreciation in their eyes when you lift [disabled people] up and put them in a wheelchair, you don't have to speak the language to see it.

"Noel has been the glue who kept [the project] together."

The first person to show up at the plaza was Javier, who had been carried there. Javier was not on the list, but he knew that his life depended on getting a wheelchair.

Nine years earlier, Javier had been working when he fell out of a coconut tree. For nine agonizing, bedridden years, he was forced to watch as his wife assumed the role of both parents and became the sole breadwinner of their family.

The Rotary group put Javier into a wheelchair, and for the first time in nearly a decade, he had mobility. A year later they were back in that same plaza, and Javier returned, sitting in that same wheelchair.

This time Javier came alone; he didn't need anyone to help him get to the plaza.

"He came back on his own to tell us how much better his life was," Morris says. "'I move from here up, help my girls get up and get dressed for school,' [Javier told the group]. Today he's an advocate for disabled people."

Morris has organized the distribution of more than 7,000 wheelchairs. They've been donated all over the globe, in war-torn regions like Bosnia and Afghanistan, and he has gone on 10 mission trips to Latin America, once a year since 2003.

He has gone into people's houses, in places where a lack of mobility is effectively a prison sentence, and lifted adults and children into wheelchairs- giving them and their caregivers new lives.

And yet, the story of Javier, all those years and wheelchairs ago, still gets to Morris. He chokes up telling the story, just as he often has when he has urged his students at the University of Arkansas' Walton College of Business to get involved in something bigger than themselves.

"I tell the kids the two most important days in your life are the day you're born and the day you know why - and now I know why I'm here," Morris says. "To me, that's why I get up every morning, to keep this thing going."

### **REAL-WORLD ISSUES**

Not too long ago, Morris called the company that issued him a credit card and demanded they lower his credit limit.

He had gotten the card because he wanted to earn airline miles - enough to visit his older son and granddaughter - and avoid those checked-bag fees he despises. But when he found out the card's limit was \$33,000, he picked up the phone and insisted it be reduced to less than half that amount.

The person on the other end of the line was astonished. No one ever asks to have their credit limit reduced, he said; users want it raised.

But Morris said that he wanted it lowered. He had no intention of approaching that \$33,000 limit, but believed that merely by having one that high, it could be affecting his credit rating.

This is the kind of story Morris shares with his business school students, real-world lessons that they otherwise might not learn before they graduate from the UA.

"One of the kids, when I started the semester, counted the number of times I said 'real world.' He lost count after 60," Morris says with a laugh. "I want them to know what it's like out there. They can make some bad choices."

His semester-long classes meet three times a week, and the overwhelming majority of his students are juniors and seniors, students who are on the verge of entering the real world. It's a critical time in their lives, Morris says, a period when all sorts of unforeseen financial traps and decisions lurk just in front of them.

"In my opinion, if you're pretty smart you learn from your mistakes - but smarter yet is to learn from somebody else's," Morris says. "That doesn't hurt as bad. I'll tell them some of the mistakes I've made and some of the things I've done right. I get to give them realworld examples.

"It's a good fit for me now. It wouldn't have been 20 years ago."

### **LOOKING FOR SOMEONE**

Morris began teaching at the UA in 2007. He was approached by the university, which was looking for someone to teach a course called Personal Financial Management.

As the name suggests, the course would cover financial matters that graduating students would face as they entered the work force - issues like disability insurance, 401(k) and retirement planning and other matters.

Morris suggested that a graduate student might be better for the job, but the school insisted that he had the perfect experience for the position. So he taught one class in the fall of 2007, teaching 60 students.

He loved it, and when he contemplated retiring a year later from a long career in insurance and financial services, he asked if it would be possible to teach more classes. So last semester, Morris taught four classes - 350 students total - in Personal Financial Management and Your Money and Credit.

"I've heard him say a bunch of times he has a story for every topic," says Sandy, his wife of 33 years. "Because he was in insurance for 25 years, he has firsthand knowledge of things you can't get out of a textbook. He's enjoyed being able to use that experience and help some kids."

### **A RESTLESS MAN**

The reason Morris obtained so much information was the same reason he became involved in Rotary: He thought his livelihood depended on it.

Morris had taught in Stuttgart before moving to Springdale in the late 1970s, taking a position as band director at Southwest Junior High. In those days, junior highs were seventh through ninth grades, and Morris loved being able to work with the same kids for three years.

By the early '80s, though, Morris needed more income than teaching provided. He and Sandy, a seventh-grade health teacher at Southwest, were starting a family, and Morris decided that he would leave teaching and go into the insurance business.

It was difficult to leave, but Morris says he never regretted it.

"In that field, a lot of times they're looking for somebody that has a good record, not necessarily someone in finance," Morris says. "There was a two-year training cycle, and in the third year I became an independent producer, so there was no financial support; you live on what you make in commissions."

Morris added financial services to expand his business, and he began joining more local civic organizations with the idea that it might bolster his business. He doubts he ever made much financially as a result of his volunteering, but the time was undoubtedly well spent.

He was a Boy Scout leader when his sons were growing up, and he was active in the Springdale Chamber of Commerce. Along with Jack Erisman and Dean Lagrone, he helped reinvigorate the Red Coats - goodwill ambassadors who serve as official representatives for the chamber.

Morris isn't the kind of person who can sit still for long; he needs to be active. After he retired in 2008, he stayed at home for a few weeks and quickly found himself going stir-crazy.

He's a regular golfer at Springdale Country Club - "I'm a hacker who enjoys the camaraderie," he says - and an avid boatsman. He and Sandy own a 27-foot Catalina, which they keep docked at Beaver Lake Sail Club.

He still loves music, just as he did when he was a first-chair trumpet player at Harrison High School in the mid-1960s. These days, Morris has gotten into bluegrass music, and he has been learning to play the banjo.

"His boredom threshold is low," Sandy Morris says. "He gets cabin fever real quick."

### **DRAWING IN OTHERS**

Sandy asked her husband for a handkerchief, but Noel needed it for his own tears.

In 2002, shortly before he began his year as Springdale Rotary Club president, the couple went to Barcelona for a Rotary International conference. There, they saw a video about Wheelchair International, which was distributing wheelchairs to those in need around the world.

Both Morris and Sandy were moved to tears by the video. On the plane ride home, Noel ditched the plans he had for his one-year term, and vowed that he would make supporting Wheelchair International his emphasis as president.

Hoping to get his fellow Rotarians behind this project, Morris invited Chris Lewis, the head of Wheelchair International and the son of famed comedian and humanitarian Jerry Lewis, to speak to the club. (Today, Springdale Rotary is aligned with the American Wheelchair Foundation, which Lewis founded after leaving Wheelchair International. At the request of Lewis, with whom he has become good friends, Morris sits on the foundation's board.)

Within about 15 minutes of Lewis' speech, Morris recalls, Springdale Rotary had pledged enough to buy a container of wheelchairs, 280 in all.

"We'd never had a project like that," says Jim Crouch of Springdale. "There was just an overwhelming response to the needs of people with wheelchairs."

"I've been on maybe five of [the trips]. When you see the immediate impact on people in wheelchairs and the people that have been carrying them around, you can see what they're doing."

### **PASSIONATE SUPPORTER**

Crouch counts himself as a passionate supporter of the program. So is his wife, Cathy, a teacher at Tyson Elementary School whose students have raised more than \$45,000 for the cause, and their son John, who just rode his bicycle from Baltimore to Springdale and raised money for the program while doing so.

Other Rotary Clubs in the region have gotten behind the wheelchair program. Morris credits Rotarians, and people like Gerald and Vickie Harp - whose frequent donations have made it easier for members to buy individual wheelchairs - with making the efforts so successful.

Countless individuals and organizations have contributed to the wheelchair program, but at the heart of it all is the Rotary Club of Springdale. And behind that is Morris, who has used his numerous positions with Rotary, most recently a two-year stint as assistant district governor, to spread the story of the wheelchair project.

One Christmas, Gary and Aletha Piker of Springdale received an unusual gift from the Morrises: a wheelchair donated in their name, along with a picture of the recipient.

Since then, the Pikers have gone on two of the wheelchair-distribution trips, and they're planning to go on the 2013 trip as well - all because they were inspired by Noel Morris' compassion.

"This all started with Noel," Gary Piker says. "He's the one that drove it, that brought the idea back to Rotary.

"It's been said that one wheelchair will change 10 lives, and from what I've seen, there's just no doubt about it. It's just unreal."

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