

David Townley

David Townley achieved his boyhood dream of leaving Little Rock to become a Navy pilot. What he never dreamed is that he'd one day be back home running the family business — and loving it.



RACHEL O'NEAL

ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

When David Townley was 10 years old, he saw the movie "Top Gun" and decided he had to become a Navy pilot.

So he came up with a plan that would give him the best chance of living his dream. Though he is from a Jewish family, he talked his folks into letting him go to Catholic High School for Boys. The reason? It gave him the best shot at getting into the Naval Academy.

"So I went to Catholic High and I did well — I was in charge of the ROTC there — and I got appointed to the United States Naval Academy in 1994," he says of the Reserve Officers' Training Corps.

Townley's father, Larry, served three tours of duty in Vietnam. "He never really pushed me one way or another. He just wanted what was good for me, but I just had a calling to serve."

Townley and his sister, Leslie, grew up in the Heights neighborhood of Little Rock. He recalls walking across Cantrell Road alone to get to Forest Park Elementary.

"There's no way I would let my kids do that today," he says of the busy four-lane thoroughfare.

After returning from Vietnam, Larry Townley worked as an architect while David's mother, Tracye, was a bank teller and then a stay-at-home mom. The couple built a pool in the backyard and Tracye realized she didn't have any idea how to take care of it. So she learned everything she could and used that knowledge to set up a little shop in the Heights neighborhood of Little Rock.

"She taught herself everything there is to know about pools, and then she thought, 'I'm going to just start this little business helping people take care of their pools.' And for 40 years that's what we've been doing. We don't build pools. We don't remodel them, or refurbish them. We help people take care of pools."

Tracye opened her business at the beginning of a year and didn't see a customer for months — not until the temperature started to rise. She grew the business by handing out zip-close baggies to friends so they could bring in pool-water samples. Today, Townley Pool and Spa has two locations, one in west Little Rock and the other in Conway, and employs nine people.

Townley graduated from Catholic High in 1994 and went straight into the Naval Academy. After graduating from the academy, Townley got married and entered the Navy's flight school, earning his wings as a Navy pilot in 2000.

Wayne Dent met Townley when they both started the ninth grade at Catholic High. He says his friend has always been driven.

"He's always been very measured in what he does," says Dent, who is

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"Hopefully, people feel my family's name carries a lot of expertise and professionalism in the community. And so that was a neat transition, to bring my skills as a military officer and my leadership to come in here and run a business where every day is different."

(Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/Cary Jenkins)

Summer program wooing young adults to live in LR

SEAN CLANCY

ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Hannah Jones hadn't planned to stick around very long when she moved to Little Rock last year. She had just graduated from Harding University in Searcy with a degree in marketing and came here to work as a business consultant with Dale Carnegie Training Mid-South.

Actually, Jones, who grew up near Fayetteville, wasn't even planning on moving to Little Rock.

"But this was the job I wanted and this was the location," she says during a recent interview. "So I moved here and thought to myself, 'I'll stay for a year or two. I don't think I really fit with Little Rock.'"

Then early last summer a friend from Harding who was interning at Baptist Health invited her to a gathering that was part of a program called Land in the Rock.

"I'd just moved here and didn't really know anybody in Little Rock," Jones says. "I went to that first event with her and had so much fun. I met

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Mallory Nelson is manager for Talent Attraction and Retention for the Greater Little Rock Chamber. Land in the Rock, the chamber's summer program for interns and young professionals, kicks off on Thursday.

(Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/Cary Jenkins)

IT TAKES A LIFETIME

Oncologist shaped by loss, love, faith

KIMBERLY DISHONGH

ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

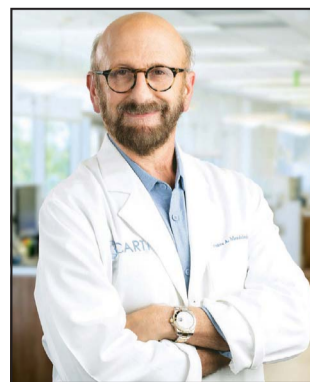
Dr. Lawrence Mendelsohn moved to Little Rock in 1985, just after completing his medical oncology training, amid questions about whether he could earn a living in the area.

"I had sent letters to every other oncologist in Little Rock and all of them said, 'There's too many oncologists here. You'll never make a living. Don't come,'" Mendelsohn says.

Against that advice, he joined Dr. Tony Flippin in a private oncology/hematology practice.

Flippin left the practice to move to Fort Smith, but Mendelsohn stayed, took on new doctors and eventually moved Little Rock Hematology/Oncology from St. Vincent Infirmary to the Baptist Health campus. By 2004, the practice had grown to a \$50 million operation, and he and his colleagues had set their sights on creating a cancer

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Dr. Lawrence Mendelsohn, 71, helped start Little Rock Hematology/Oncology in 1985, just after completing his medical training. In 2011, he led a merger of that clinic with CARTI, bringing radiologists, medical oncologists and ancillary cancer care services together under one roof.

(Special to the Democrat-Gazette)

Townley

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a claims adjuster for the Social Security Administration. "He's very quick to come up with a plan and follow through with it."

Dent and Townley were in Catholic High's ROTC program together.

"In order to get his nomination to the Naval Academy, he had all of the Arkansas senators, all of the representatives send recommendations," Dent recalls. "He kind of went over what was expected."

Tony Sclafani of Detroit met Townley at the Naval Academy and the two men shared a dorm room their sophomore year. Sclafani is now director of international programs for a defense contractor.

"He's a very good friend who has a great sense of humor," Sclafani says. "He is somebody who is easy to get along with, very genuine. With some people, you can kind of tell when they are being fake or if they are just kind of evaluating what this person can do for me. Dave is not like that. He's just a genuine guy."

A BOY NAMED DAVID

In all, Townley spent 13 years flying for the Navy as a cargo pilot. He flew cargo, mail and people out to Naval aircraft carriers. During his service, he was awarded two Navy Commendation medals, two Navy Achievement medals and several other service-related awards.

"It was a different mission every single day," says Townley, who was a battalion commander. "It required a lot of knowledge for foreign countries and how to deal with dignitaries and way higher ranked people than I was as the pilot."

Townley's most notable passengers included Donald Rumsfeld, then secretary of defense; Ari Fleischer, former White House press secretary to President George W. Bush; and Condoleezza Rice, who served as secretary of state during the administration of Bush and his father, President George H.W. Bush.

"The beauty of it was it was just a different job every day. One day we would be full of VIPs, and the next day, we flew a bunch of toilet paper out to the aircraft carrier, because that's high-priority cargo when they run out of toilet paper."

Townley was aware that he was transporting some of the most important people in the world and, of course, he knew their lives were in his hands. He says hours and hours of Navy training helped prepare his nerves. But he admits he never got used to landing on military carrier ships.

"You're landing on a postage stamp in the middle of the ocean versus a 8,000-foot-long runway," he says, comparing carrier landings to traditional runway landings. "Yeah, that's a young man's sport."

Any near misses? "We always had issues, you know, airplane malfunctions, bad weather, but never had any mishaps or accidents. Thank gosh. Knock on wood."

With all of these missions, Townley has a favorite.

"We were coming out of Bahrain, and we had a guy on the ship who was trying to get back to land so that he could catch an airline to get home and witness the birth of his first child," Townley says of the memory.



"I get to talk to today's youth that want to go do what I did — serve our country. They want to give something more of themselves to military service. I'm in awe of these kids. I interview kids that I wish I could hire to come work for me in my business. But these kids have high aspirations for military service." (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/Cary Jenkins)

"We had bad weather and issues with the plane. My whole team got the plane fixed in time and the ship was getting into good weather so that we could actually take off with this individual and get him to where he needed to be so he could catch his flight home," he says. "It all just kind of clicked. Everybody didn't care about their own personal stuff. They were like, 'How can we come together and get this accomplishment done?' It was pretty cool."

His buddy made it home in time to witness the birth of his son.

"I would love to say that he named his child after me, but it's probably a coincidence that he named the child David," he says with a laugh. "Whether or not it's true, I don't know."

THE THRILL WAS GONE

After fulfilling his military obligation, Townley was ready to come home. He tried transitioning into civil flying, and he took a job as a pilot with Delta Airlines. He only lasted six months.

"I knew from day one that this was not what I wanted to do. I missed flying in the Navy. I missed the people," he says.

He also missed the adrenaline rush he got from military missions. And while the money for a commercial pilot is great, the job felt more like driving a bus.

"As an airline pilot, you're gone for four days, you're back home for three days, you're back gone for four days, you're back home for two days," he says. "It was a lot of traveling, and that was not fun."

He didn't mind the work but missed the camaraderie between him and his fellow soldiers.

"It just wasn't the same as when I was in the Navy. Like

SELF PORTRAIT

David Townley

■ **FAVORITE MOVIE OF ALL TIME:** "Top Gun" (the first one, not the crappy second one).

■ **THE BEST ADVICE I EVER GOT:** Spend good money on your shoes and your mattress. You will spend 70% of your life on them.

■ **I DRIVE A:** Ford F-150.

■ **EVERY BACKYARD SHOULD HAVE:** A hot tub — it can be used all year to spend quality time with your family. Time is your most precious asset.

■ **THE CRAZIEST FEATURE ON MY OWN POOL IS:** We have 19 lights in our pool!

■ **MY LAST MEAL WOULD INCLUDE:** Brisket.

■ **MY GUILTY PLEASURE IS:** Bourbon.

■ **THE MOST FAMOUS PERSON I HAVE EVER MET WAS:** Joe Kleine.

■ **MY ROLE MODEL IS:** My dad, Larry Townley.

■ **THE ADVICE I WOULD GIVE MY TEENAGE SELF:** Invest in yourself first.

■ **THE BEST WAY TO SPEND \$20 IS:** Texas Twinkies from Back Home BBQ.

■ **IN MY REFRIGERATOR YOU WILL ALWAYS FIND:** Honeycrisp apples.

■ **THE ONE WORD TO DESCRIBE ME:** Resourceful.

real mission stuff. Like 'Hey, you guys have to go over here and pick up these Marines and bring them back out here to the boat so that we can get them into Fallujah for this operation we're doing next week.' Like, real-world stuff," he says.

The airline work was "just boring, for a lack of a better term," and he missed using his brain during military missions.

So he and his parents sat down and devised a plan. Larry and Tracey Townley had run Townley Pools and Spa for 25 years. It was time for their son to take it over.

"I never thought I would be in the pool business. You

know, I knew that there's not a whole lot of naval bases in Arkansas. There's no oceans in Arkansas. I knew I was going to be a Navy pilot living on one of the coasts, and then you grow up and you have children and your priorities change," he says.

By then, Townley was married to his first wife and they had three young children at home. Running the business made sense. But he maintained his military presence by remaining in the Navy Reserve as a Blue and Gold Officer.

Meanwhile, Townley and his first wife divorced, and Townley married his second

wife, Jessica. She has a son.

"It was a no-brainer," he says of taking over the business. "Hopefully, people feel my family's name carries a lot of expertise and professionalism in the community. And so that was a neat transition, to bring my skills as a military officer and my leadership to come in here and run a business where every day is different."

And his mom, Tracey, taught him the pool business well.

"I jokingly say I never bounced a check and the place hasn't caught fire. So she knew that I was capable."

Tracey agrees.

"I taught him a few things about customer service and he caught on to that so fast, and then he knew how to do the books so fast," she says. "He brought another dimension to the store."

And Tracey says her son's love of movies went beyond "Top Gun." He also had been a fan of "The Karate Kid" and had convinced his parents to let him take karate lessons.

"Did he tell you he is a second-degree black belt?" Tracey asks. "He decided he wanted to do that and he got up to second degree — the point where the teacher was making him teach."

A DIFFERENT KIND OF ADRENALINE

While he is no longer flying life-and-death missions in far-away countries, Townley says he now gets his adrenaline rush from his employees.

"I feel responsible to be able to take care of them so that they can take care of their families. I jokingly say the customers are always right, or customers first. And I kind of put a little swing on that and say my employees come first," he says. "If I take care of my

employees professionally, they will, in turn, take care of my customers professionally, and my customers will reward me with their business."

About a third of the work at Townley revolves around the sales of hot tubs and saunas; another third is pool chemicals and accessories; and the remainder is pool service and support.

A couple of years ago, Townley noticed some of his customers had become interested in how they can improve their health in their own backyards. He now sells in-home saunas and cold-plunge tubs.

"They're looking to do things that are going to help benefit their bodies. They want to improve their range of motion. They want to improve their flexibility. They want to reduce inflammation and aches and pains," he says.

He is a believer in hot saunas and ice-cold plunges. He jumps in an icy tub every day and has a sauna in his garage next to his Peloton stationary bike and his weights.

"I'm 50 years old, and you start to feel some pain with motion," he says. "When I get out of my sauna, I feel younger and I feel more body freedom, where I can move with ease," he says. "I don't rely on Motrin. I don't take Advil. I don't do any of those. I look for something I can do that's more natural."

BLUE AND GOLD

Blue and Gold Officers are field representatives of the admissions process at the U.S. Naval Academy who cover a specific geographic area, usually defined by high schools. They encourage exceptional individuals to seek a naval career through the Naval Academy and other officer-accession programs. The officers typically are retired military officers.

Townley serves as the Naval Academy's liaison in Arkansas and interviews candidates who are interested in attending the academy. He meets with potential candidates monthly as part of the interview process. The job is unpaid, but Townley does get to rack up points that will later apply to his retirement benefits when he reaches the age of 60.

"I am the Navy's eyes and ears as their first look at the candidates here in the state of Arkansas," he says.

He says he will continue to serve as a Blue and Gold officer "until I can't see anymore." He is one of 20 officers in the state.

"I get to talk to today's youth that want to go do what I did — serve our country," he says.

"They want to give something more of themselves to military service. I'm in awe of these kids. I interview kids that I wish I could hire to come work for me in my business. But these kids have high aspirations for military service."

And while he might miss the thrill of landing a cargo plane on a carrier in the middle of the ocean, Townley says he loves being at home in Little Rock.

"I feel super lucky that I have this business. Because this is a fun business. My friends that own HVAC companies and plumbing companies, they go out and do repair work. I mean, everybody loves plumbing and HVAC when they need it. They just don't like doing it."

"This is a whole lot more fun. People bring their kids and their family, and they sit in this hot tub, and they sit in that one and they sit in this one. It's a family kind of deal. It's really cool."

Is the status handbag now passe?

VANESSA FRIEDMAN
THE NEW YORK TIMES

Are women's handbags becoming obsolete? I notice they are not as popular as they used to be. Some very powerful professional women do not use them, preferring clothing with pockets and/or brief cases. Is the age of the handbag over?

— Nancy, Abyhoj, Denmark

Our relationship to fashion items changes over time, and when it comes to handbags, we are at something of a pivot point.

The data bears this out: According to a spokesperson for Lyst, the fashion search engine, "After years of growth, demand for women's handbags was down 5.5% in April 2026 compared to April 2025."

However, she went on, using the same comparison, "searches for briefcases are up 14%." As for clothes with

pockets, search volume rose a whopping 542% between January and April.

So what exactly is going on? I think the answer has to do with both fashion trends and power. The two are connected but also different.

Fashion first. The supremacy of the It bag, that millennial symbol of arrival that was a flag on the arm to alert a wider world to an individual's currency, taste and achievement, has fractured along with the wider culture.

Every algorithm-driven niche now has its own bit of purse semiotics: the Trader Joe tote for the crunchy urban liberal set; the Prada Re-Edit 1995 for Carolyn Bessette Kennedy wannabes; the Row clutch for the stealth wealth set.

As luxury bag prices have risen to formerly unimaginable heights — the new, much buzzed-about Chanel Maxi Flap bag (leather, not quilted) is \$8,500 — many consumers, even the very few

who can afford them, have turned away in offense.

It can seem cooler to resurrect an old It bag than to risk looking like a fashion victim with a new one.

And finally, the advent of phone technology means that more stuff can be contained in a much smaller space, and toting a mess of papers and objects might make you look old-fashioned.

Which leads me to the final reason our relationship to bags might be shifting: Generally, the more powerful the person, the less the need to carry a bag.

The more powerful the person, the more likely they are to have people around them to deal with their stuff.

That means that if you are paying attention to that adage about dressing for the job you want (or the job you just got), the power move is to lose the handbag.

All of which points to the conclusion that what is obsolete is not necessarily the bag, but the era of its dominance.

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