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MONEY *for* **Retirement**

**5 Easy Steps
to a Financially
Secure Retirement**

Ronald G. Escoffery

Founder of Knowledge for Life, Inc.

Money for Retirement
5 Easy Steps to a Financially Secure Retirement
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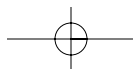
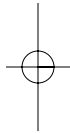
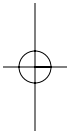
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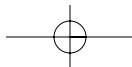
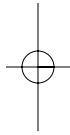
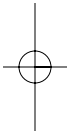


*This book is dedicated to my family,
without whom success could not have been achieved,
happiness could not have been found,
and life could not have been lived...*





Make Your Golden Years *Prosperous!*



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my friends, clients, and colleagues for making my career, and this book, possible. I could never begin to list all of your names here, but I have a feeling you know who you are. (And if you don't, you probably will when your signed copy arrives!) Your trust, camaraderie, and wisdom have been a true source of inspiration over these past years, and I look forward to more of the same in the future.

Through good times and bad, strong markets and weak, we have faced the ups and downs of the fickle financial sector with vim, vigor, and vitality; I can only hope the challenges to come can be met with the same attributes. Thank you for making my dreams come true, and for always helping me to set new goals for myself.

It is at times like this that a man begins to tally those who have influenced and guided his life; in looking back on my relationships with all of you, I can truly count myself blessed to know so many people with such wide and varied tastes, personalities, and interests. In the bank of life I can truly consider myself a very, very rich man. I hope that I, too, have added to your accounts, falling in the asset column versus the liability!



An Excerpt from *Money for Retirement*

Planning, like eating right or exercising, is a habit we must often force ourselves into. It's not always easy, it's rarely convenient, and quite often it's downright painful, but they don't call it "financial planning" for nothing.

Look at me; I've made a career out of planning for the future, and not a day goes by that I don't learn something new or find my job fascinating. Numbers are often intimidating; I know that. I get that. But these aren't random figures in some junior high math book or factoids in a trivia puzzle.

These are your numbers; this is your life we're talking about here. Isn't it time you took hold of the reins and started steering your finances in the same direction as the rest of your life?

To do that, it will take careful, prolonged, and very specific planning. We're not talking rocket science here, though if you have trouble balancing your checkbook it might feel like it at first! Still, time must be taken and attention must be paid to the particulars of your financial past, present, and future.

This includes sitting down and staring at your whole financial picture square in the face. Knowing where you are now is the best place to start preparing for where you want to be in the future. It can be hard at first, I know. Financial statements pile up, and aren't that easy to read to begin with.

In this case, it's important to start somewhere, so why not start where you are? If you're using one bank now for all of your financial services – checking, savings, money market, 401(k), automatic bill pay, CDs, etc. – learn everything you can about this institution. Study its Website, swing by the nearest branch office on your way home one day and grab all those fancy brochures you've been meaning to read for years.

Then read them! You'll be amazed at how quickly you pick up certain terms, rates, deadlines, fees, etc. You may even be surprised you went so long without doing it in the first place.

And, frankly, that's my hope. *Financial planning for your retirement is like exercise*; it can be difficult at first, but will eventually become a habit. Exercising is a habit more of us should get into, and one that those of us who are already into typically enjoy.

It's rough at first, sure, and maybe we still have some pounds to lose or we make excuses for exercising more than we actually do it, but when we do exercise, when we do practice that habit, we feel pretty good, don't we? Same with eating right, another habit I compare to planning for your financial future.

We all know the difference we feel after eating a pizza for dinner and bowl of ice cream for dessert as opposed to how we feel when we dine on, say, a broiled chicken breast and fresh broccoli. Maybe we don't feel as full, but we sure feel a whole lot better, right?

It is my hope that planning your finances becomes like that for you; tough at first, but well worth the effort down the line and, hopefully, just as addictive as jogging or going to the gym!



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~ ABOUT THIS BOOK ~
America Is Graying – Are We Prepared?

Over 78 million Americans will reach retirement age in the next ten years. Far from looking forward to their so-called “golden years,” most are worried if they will have enough money to maintain their lifestyle in retirement. Instead of picturing themselves lying on sandy beaches drinking umbrella drinks, they are now worried about how long they’ll have to work – and even how many jobs – just to stay afloat in these uncertain economic times. In fact, the latest census figures indicate that only *one in every ten* Americans today is financially prepared to retire when he or she reaches age 65!

As life expectancies continue to increase and career incomes continue to decrease, millions of Americans are wondering what sort of retirement they will experience when that magical age of 65 arrives. Most working people envision that their retirement years should be better than their working years. The reality is, that for people age 65 and older, 63% have annual incomes under \$25,000.

Building wealth through the ownership of Real Estate and Small Businesses is one of the surest ways to avoid becoming a retirement statistic. Ron Escoffery, Entrepreneur, Real Estate and Financial Expert, will be sharing his knowledge through speaking, seminars and workshops. Ron Escoffery knows that for you to achieve your retirement goals you must have a plan. A goal without a plan is bound to fail. A plan that is not written is no plan at all.

Ron Escoffery understands that investors’ confidence has been shaken by recent developments in the financial sector. The question that faces every American today is as simple as it is unsettling: Whom can I trust to give solid, unbiased, customized advice regarding my retirement investments?

What Americans need now more than ever is an expert who

knows Investing, knows Money Management, knows Real Estate, knows Small Business Ownership, but most importantly knows how to leverage all this knowledge to help you meet your financial goals.

That's what this book is all about – serious financial advice from an industry leader. *Money for Retirement: 5 Easy Steps to Financially Secure Retirement* is broken down into four simple, easy-to-follow, and even easier to implement sections designed to get you the information you need to make your golden years platinum NOW!

In **Section 1: *The Money Problem***, Ron lays out the dilemma facing our country as it stands on the threshold between dependence and independence. Here the concepts of our dwindling Social Security funds, as well as the pitfalls of the corporate retirement plan, are uncovered and brought out into the light, warts and all.

During **Section 2: *The 5 Steps for Achieving a Financially Secure Retirement***, Ron lays it out for his readers, step-by-step. Here we discover Ron's revolutionary proven steps for achieving financial success, even during retirement.

- **Step # 1** – *Investing in Real Estate*
- **Step # 2** – *Small Business Ownership*
- **Step # 3** – *Buying a Franchise*
- **Step # 4** – *Investing in the Stock Market*
- **Step # 5** – *Living Within Your Means*

In **Section 3: *Your Financial Checkup***, readers are encouraged to take a long, hard, perhaps even sobering look at their current financial situation. This is not the time for rose-colored glasses, but instead the chance to take a laser-accurate assessment of your own personal finances. Here a series of guided instruction, self-tests, quizzes, and checklists helps readers understand not only where they are, but what they need to do to get where they want to go.

Section 4 is Ron's revolutionary new *30-Day Retirement Journal*, where readers can uncap that red pen they've been dying to use and write down their thoughts, feelings, and emotions concerning this occasionally overwhelming period of change and adjustment. Few authors encourage their readers to write in their books, but Ron does!

More than mere lines on a page, however, Ron's journal is designed to be "use today, implement today." It challenges every reader to probe more deeply into his or her own feelings, specifically by posing a problem and solution for each day. Ron has found this practice beneficial, not only in his own practice, but in his own personal life as well.

Ron can truly relate to his readers' desire to achieve financial freedom and financial success. After all, he came to the United States in 1977 with his young wife, his newborn daughter, and few dollars in his pocket.

From such a humble beginning, today Ron controls a multimillion-dollar portfolio of real estate and business assets. He holds an MBA in finance and entrepreneurship from Rutgers University Graduate School of Business Administration and a BA in economics.

More than just an author, Ron is the former founder/owner of an investment-banking firm. Ron is an entrepreneur and is actively engaged in his businesses and investments; his advice is not purely academic or research-based, but instead hands-on and dynamic, based on his own experiences in the world of finance, which he shares in personal anecdotes throughout the book. Sharing his experience and knowledge with others who want to achieve financial freedom also is the essence of Ron's seminar and speaking business.



AUTHOR'S NOTE

My Story

"The question isn't at what age I want to retire, it's at what income."

~ George Foreman

Today I reluctantly sat down to start this book. I say "reluctantly" not because I didn't want to begin, but because even I, the guru of goal setting, the very one who knows the importance of goal setting and has reaped enormous benefits from it, was still fighting the demon of procrastination – the biggest thief of our time, ambition and potential.

Today, everyone wants to be financially successful, financially secure, or just plain wealthy. The problem, though, is that, even with the best of intentions and the strongest of desires, most of us fall short of these goals.

Jaded and oftentimes frustrated, eventually we give up on our goals far too soon for them to reach their full fruition. We need to realize that failure should not be an option. You only fail when you stop trying, so the key to success comes in continuing to try until you try the right things.

Here you are going to learn about the failures and triumphs of the first 50 years of my life, and how after many failures, setbacks, disappointments, and disenchantment with life, I finally reached my goal of having a net worth of over one million dollars.

To say it is easy would be a lie. To say it is impossible would be equally scandalous. To believe it is possible requires a leap of faith. To achieve it requires faith, discipline, goal setting, hard work, and belief in yourself.

This book is both a guide and a story. The story is about my journey from a very humble birth in Kingston, Jamaica to the

“Promised Land,” Atlanta, Georgia, in 1977, where I have lived ever since.

This book will show you how faith really works, even if you are not on the street corner with a microphone proclaiming God. Faith is extremely important and God is essential to a strong faith. How you worship and acknowledge him is a personal matter. Belief in yourself is required, and there is nothing wrong with having a strong ego.

There will be days when your faith and ego are at war with each other, which can be a confusing and confounding experience. But don't worry, it is the result that is important, not who gets the credit.

Setting your sights on something much better than your current situation is vital. It pushes you and makes you stretch your limits. In other words, it forces you to grow. You must be prepared to work hard for what you want. And perhaps most importantly, you must be willing to pay **THE PRICE**.

Paying the price is where most of us get stuck and give up. We make the mistake of thinking that price is merely money, something we can quantify, turn over, and then be done with. Unfortunately, though, this doesn't mean we are finished paying. In fact, money is often the least important part of paying the price. What could be more important? The price of something really consists of all the things you must do and sacrifice to achieve that goal. It is having the attitude and commitment necessary to stick with your plans when the going gets tough, or giving up something you love and think you can't live without.

It is the willingness to give up watching television or going out on Friday night; maybe your weekend golf game has to be cancelled; maybe you'll have to miss church, all because something critical to the achievement of your goal must be done. **WOULD YOU DO IT? CAN YOU DO IT?**

When people say to me, “Ron, I want to become financially secure, can you show me how?” I reply by saying something like, “Sure, can we meet this Saturday morning at 5:30 a.m. to get started on the journey?”

By their reaction you would think I had asked them to give up their first-born. You see, Saturday morning at 5:30 a.m. is a very inconvenient hour for most of us. We say that we are willing to pay the price, until we realize that the price includes much more than money.

A STUDY IN PERSEVERANCE

I came to the United States for the first time in August of 1968. As far as the immigration officers knew, I had come to visit a relative for two weeks. My real intentions were decidedly different. I came here for a chance at a better life. And here is an instance where my own strong faith and my willingness to succeed clashed with each other: If I had told the immigration officer the truth, my life would be vastly different today.

I was born in Kingston, Jamaica, of humble circumstances. As early as 9 years of age I knew that my life had to be different from my parents'. I decided then that I wanted to be a success in life; I wanted to be a financial success. My problem, though, was that I had no clue how to go about getting started. I had no mentor, friend, confidant, or role model to show me. But I held on to my dream, quietly, not sharing it with anyone. After all, I didn't want to become the laughing stock of my friends.

At home my father favored my sister and my mother favored me. Dad lavished my sister with all the financial resources he could put his hands on. Mom lavished me with love and nurturing. My sister grew up lacking discipline, but I learned the benefits of discipline and work.

Looking back now, I realize that although my beginnings were humble, I never felt poor, underprivileged, or wanting or lacking for anything. The circumstances of my birth were never an issue. I never wished that I had been born elsewhere or of other parents or under different conditions. I, Ron Escoffery, somehow knew that one day everything would be fine. Maybe I just didn't know any better.

Although I had no mentor or role model, I chose a lifestyle very early in life, one that I aspired to and studied, both through observation and by dreaming of what could be. All my friends growing up were better at sports and games than I was, except for the game of Monopoly. Later on in life I discovered why.

Back when I lied to that immigration officer I had already started to pay the price. Would you do the same in my place? Don't worry, you don't have to answer. When I settled in Baltimore I didn't have the money to pay for much of anything. Still, I enrolled in school and started my first American job, working as a cashier and bagging groceries despite not having a working visa.

I also needed a place to live, but where? I think God sent the Reverend and Mrs. Guthrie to me, the second big break in my new life. They gave me my own room, something I'd never had before. Even today we remain family. I was blessed with two great women in my life at an early age, my biological mother and Mrs. Guthrie, who I consider my second mother.

Today I have an ulcer – stress will do that to you – and I had plenty of stress back then. Most of it was from the uncertainty of my immigration status. There were days in class when every time I saw two men in suits walking on campus, I was convinced that they were looking for me, coming to deport me back to Jamaica.

As a result I often left class abruptly to avoid being spotted by these imaginary immigration officers. It wasn't easy. Having few resources and avoiding the authorities took a toll on me. I was paying the price of my future success.

Money For Retirement

Ron Escoffery

Fortunately, angels came from everywhere in the form of good people, both white and black. The school financial officer, Mr. Hammond, had seen my name so often on the delinquent list that eventually we came to know each other by sight. He gave me a college work-study job to help pay my way. "Press on, my brother, your reward is assured." Things were looking up for me.

I transferred and graduated from Howard University. On the day of my graduation I left town for Newark, New Jersey to attend Rutgers University Graduate School of Business Administration. Angels appeared again, this time in the form of a full scholarship that included fees, books, housing and transportation. And speaking of angels, I married Joyce in 1971. In 1972 we bought our first new car; the car is history, but Joyce is still here, keeping me balanced and thankful.

I graduated Rutgers with an MBA and joined Chase Manhattan Bank's Management Training Program, but not before I took a chance on myself and tested my confidence. Human Resources at Chase told me that there were two training programs. One was for graduates of the top schools, like Harvard, Stanford, and Wharton, and it lasted for nine months. The other was for everyone else and lasted fourteen months. I wanted to do the nine months, realizing, of course, that every Friday my job was on the line. If you did not do well, you were fired. I was allowed in and completed the program along with the Ivy Leaguers.

I was assigned to the International Banking Division and my first assignment was back to Jamaica. By then, fortunately, the bank had seen to settling my immigration problems. I had come what seemed to be full circle, living back home as an international banker, with a house in the hills, wanting for nothing.

Yes, my dreams had come true. This was the life I had dreamed of, had worked for, and felt entitled to. Now I was enjoying it. I took the time to say "thanks" to everyone who had helped me along the way. It was truly a journey.

Just as I was becoming accustomed to this wonderful new life, things changed. Capitalism and Socialism were on a collision course in Jamaica. I am a capitalist. It was not good to be a capitalist at that time in Jamaica and I was considered to be among “the oppressors.”

Yes, believe it or not, some people believed that I had stepped on or over others to gain my success. Joyce, our 3-year-old daughter, and I left Jamaica in 1977 with \$150 to our names and headed for The Promised Land, Atlanta, Georgia.

YOU CAN IF YOU THINK YOU CAN *(You Won't if You Think You Can't)*

The trip to Atlanta was an experience. Not having enough money to fly or even take the Greyhound bus when we arrived in the United States, we faced the first of many challenges.

After persistent pleading with a good friend from graduate school, we were loaned a 1964 Fiat. A Fiat on its best days is a most temperamental car. It runs when it wants to and stops without notice, and this car had seen its better days.

A trip that would normally take 16 hours, took us a week. In those days most people did not know what a Fiat was and had no clue how to fix one, so after the car broke down in the Carolinas we spent many nights in filthy motels, waiting for parts to arrive so that we could continue on our journey.

Eventually we arrived in Atlanta. By this time we were really broke. The \$150 was long spent and we were in a new city with no money, no jobs, no credit and no reliable means of transportation. It truly was a low point in our lives. We moved in with a friend I had met while at Chase in New York: four adults and one 3 year old in a two-bedroom apartment.

It didn't matter: we had arrived in the Promised Land.

Atlanta was not the panacea we thought it would be and we had our work cut out for us. Our natural instincts told us to go out and find jobs, so we took turns sitting with our daughter while one of us would go out to find employment. It was December and cold, and not being properly dressed for the weather made it a real challenge. After all, we had just come from Jamaica, a tropical climate. We were miserable, and cold and flu found us to be easy prey. After a disappointing period of job-hunting, we began to wonder if we had made a mistake by not going to New York. You can always find work in New York.

What I thought would be an asset for me turned out to be a liability. You see, this was 1977 and I had an MBA and had completed the training program of one of the world's top banks. In Jamaica I was a bank officer with a New York salary and a hardship allowance for taking the assignment. I had run a merchant bank and started an investment bank from scratch for one of Jamaica's largest companies.

In short, I was too qualified and had too high a salary expectation. Oh, that was an easy way to justify saying "No" back then! When I tried to let my prospective employers know I was aware that the salary structure in Atlanta was quite different from New York and that I would take whatever was offered, I was told that, "You will not stay, you would not be satisfied."

On the contrary, I would have been *very* satisfied. I was broke, hungry and my child needed milk. We took whatever jobs we could find. Nothing compared to what we earned before, but we could finally pay our rent and feed ourselves. This was a tough period of our lives. We were uncomfortable, dissatisfied and worried.



THE MAKING OF A MILLIONAIRE

We sat down and pondered our future and discussed the life we wanted for ourselves. In the struggle to survive I had forgotten my dreams, but now, with enough money for rent and food, they suddenly started coming back to me. I told myself, "You came here to be successful; you came here to provide a better life for your family. It is time to begin that journey." Although it seemed unrealistic, I knew instinctively that I would be successful, just as I had known as a child.

We set a goal of having a million-dollar real estate portfolio in five years. When I made the mistake of sharing my dreams, I was ridiculed. "Ron," acquaintances would say to me, "you have no money, you're broke, you have no credit, you don't have a job, not even reliable transportation. How do you think you are going to be a millionaire in five years?" Sadly, it was a real eye-opener.

From then on I became a more private person and kept my thoughts and plans to myself. The joke at the time was, "Let Ron open his briefcase and show you his million-dollar plan!" It was an uneasy and humbling period for me, but I was reminded of an old saying that goes, "He who laughs last, laughs best."

I intended to have the last laugh.

Notwithstanding my list of "Don't Haves," I began my journey to financial success and independence and chose real estate as the vehicle. During the next five years I took jobs that I would sooner forget about. There were employers who promised one thing and paid me something completely different, depending on their feelings that day. But I pressed on.

My journey was not without many failures, trials and disappointments. There were days when even I questioned my sanity. But nothing can beat a strong will and desire and the determination of a soul to achieve what it wants. I knew what I wanted and

was willing to pay the full price. I wanted financial success.

Real estate proved to be the answer to my prayers. But even real estate was not without its pains as I learned some very valuable lessons. Even with adopting Donald Trump as a distant mentor (without his knowledge, of course), Robert Collier as my spiritual advisor, and Warren Buffet as the person who taught me discipline, I made my own mistakes.

There were other mentors along the way: I loved Trammel Crow for his risk-taking and attitude, and T. Boone Pickens taught me early how leverage and negotiation could lead to large dollar rewards.

No, I have never actually met any of these gentlemen in person, only through their books. But I benefited tremendously from reading their autobiographies. These are the only books I read, and even today the library is the first place where I look for ideas and inspiration. They were my heroes. My all-time favorite is Robert Collier's *Secret of the Ages*, a must-read in my mind for all who aspire to be successful.

Success in real estate stopped the laughter and ridicule of my friends and enemies alike. Quietly, I reached my goal of one million dollars in real estate assets within the time frame I had set for myself. I was on my way. We did not change our lifestyle for a long time. Yes, we did move into our own home, a modest four-bedroom, but no new cars, Polo's, or Gucci's for us.

This was the time period when I earned my education in how to make money, something I never learned in business school. The lessons I learned then are the lessons I will be sharing with you for the rest of this book. My hope in writing this is that these lessons will help you just as much as they helped me.

If you're ready, I'd be honored to become *your* mentor ...



~ INTRODUCTION ~
Flush After 50 – Fact or Fiction?

“Nature’s mighty law is change...”

~ Robert Burns, poet

Congratulations! You have reached a milestone: the halfway point, as it were, for our time on this planet. You’ve survived childhood, education, part-time jobs, sports, relationships, life’s lessons, a degree (or two) from the School of Hard Knocks, perhaps even children, a successful career, a happy marriage, and who knows, maybe even a war or two.

You have seen this country emerge as a founding nation beset by Depression and change, war and peacetime. You have not only witnessed history; you have created it. Your actions have helped us become the world leader we are today, but you’re not through yet: you still have much to offer.

You’ve made it through the *Learning Years* of your youth, the *Earning Years* of your young adulthood, and are now ready to face the *Turning Years* of your retirement years.

You are to be commended, congratulated, and celebrated. There should be a party in your honor, given to commemorate this auspicious occasion. But think on that for a minute: Are you really in the celebratory mood?

What used to be a calm, reflective, idle time – retirement – has slowly grown into a financial purgatory from which few of us will escape. Social Security’s on the chopping block, pensions are a thing of the past, your employer would rather lay you off and hire two young rookies to do the job you once did, if only to save him-

self a few bucks, and your stocks aren't worth half of what they used to be.

While that may be the doom and gloom version, albeit an entirely realistic one, chances are you've spent many a restless night asking yourself the following question: ***Will I have enough?***

Enough savings? Enough investments? Enough assets? Enough equity? Enough in my 401(k)? Enough to last me? Well, take heart, you're far from being alone: The latest census figures indicate that only one in every ten Americans today is financially prepared to retire when they reach age 65!

I know it's easy to read a statistic and gloss over its full importance, but think about that number for a minute: Only one in ten Americans today is financially prepared to retire when they reach age 65.

That means nine of us *aren't* ready. That means nine of us won't have enough savings, won't have enough investments, won't have enough assets, won't have enough equity, won't have enough in their 401(k), and won't, in the end, have enough to last them through a normal, healthy retirement.

Are you? Will you be ready for your golden years? (Or will they be more like silver or bronze? Or maybe copper or even rust?) Will your house be paid off? Will your credit be good? Will you be able to sit on the back porch and watch the sunset at night confident that you'll sleep well in the knowledge that your finances are secure and your financial future is sound, or will you toss and turn thinking about what you could have, should have, would have done years earlier...if only you'd known better?

In this book we are going to be asking tough questions, but I promise I'll never ask you a question to which I won't also provide the answer. We'll be taking a long, hard look at the role you can play in creating a sound financial future, and while it may not always be pleasant I can tell you from experience that it's absolutely vital in

creating your dream retirement as opposed to a nightmare a few years down the road.

Is it any wonder then that as life expectancies continue to increase millions of Americans are wondering what sort of retirement they will experience? Trust me; you are not alone. Most working people envision that their retirement years should be better than their working years. The reality is, unfortunately, that for people aged 65 and older, 63% have annual incomes under \$25,000.

Talk about doom and gloom!

But it doesn't have to be this way. In fact, it's all a matter of perspective. You can look at the facts and figures and resign yourself to a retirement full of grocery store coupons and low-budget vacations, or you can take the reins of your retirement and steer yourself toward a (much) brighter financial future.

I call it passive retirement versus active retirement. In the passive model, you take what you get and live with it. It's tempting, I know. You've earned it – and then some. A lifetime of work, commitment, dedication, and savings has entitled you to a few golden years of rest and relaxation, hasn't it?

Unfortunately, times have changed since your parents – and mine – retired. No longer is Social Security a sure thing, and even 401(k)'s and pension plans have their limits. And resting on your laurels won't help pay the bills, or take that extra vacation each year, or fix the car when it breaks down, or buy your grandson a new – or even a used – car when he turns age 16.

It's not your fault. You did all the right things: worked hard, built a savings account, invested wisely, bought a house, all those things your parents taught you to do as they themselves reached their own retirement. Unfortunately, what worked for them won't work for us; the passive model simply won't provide you what you need when it comes time for you to retire. It's unfortunate, but true. All that's left now is to face up to it and move forward.

In the active retirement model, YOU take control of your own financial destiny. You assess what you have, as well as what you lack, and bridge the gulf between these two figures with an action plan that involves a variety of business opportunities that may just find you enjoying a whole new lease on life.

Be they investing in property or the stock market, or selling your expertise or starting a small business franchise, your retirement income is only limited by your ingenuity, effort, and expertise.

In fact, I want you to stop thinking about it as retirement altogether and start thinking about it as a new lease on life. A new beginning, a period of opportunity and growth to rival that of any other period of your life, if not exceed it. Vacation drinks and sandy beaches are one thing, and everybody needs a vacation. But for so long we've been taught that retirement should equal relaxing that we've grown into a mindset that won't let us envision anything less.

Fine; great. Let's relax, let's enjoy, but the fact remains that relaxing alone, enjoying alone, might not get you what you need to keep relaxing, to keep enjoying. We can no longer stick our heads in the sand and assume that we'll be "taken care of" by a government with its own kettle of fish to deal with. If anything, the recent failure of government to respond to Hurricane Katrina promptly and professionally – and the national unease that followed this breakdown on all levels of our administration – should show us that we are the masters of our own destiny, not our president, not our political parties, not our governmental agencies, and not our state and local governments.

Let's face it, people: we are on our own.

I know it can be daunting. Weren't these the years you were supposed to sit back, unwind, and relax? Wasn't this the time when you were hoping to play golf more and visit your friendly financial planner less? Well, you can still relax, only now it comes