

# BUILDING A VISION

In Dallas, Eliza Solender '73 is helping nonprofits develop long-term strategies for their physical assets—an interest that began at Emerson.

**WHEN ELIZA SOLENDER '73** got to Emerson College, she found that what she wanted to learn couldn't be covered by any one major. So she forged her own path.

"I was allowed to create my own major," said Solender, who ended up crafting a degree from Broadcasting and what was then called Business and Industrial Communication, with a hefty dose of public speaking thrown in. "My advisor was [future president] John Zacharis. He said, 'Do what you want; I'll supervise you.'"

Twenty years later, Solender again found herself with a lot of ideas and a lack of existing options. Armed with her Emerson degree, years of experience in the corporate world, and a deep appreciation for nonprofit organizations, Solender and a partner, Margaret Hall, started Solender

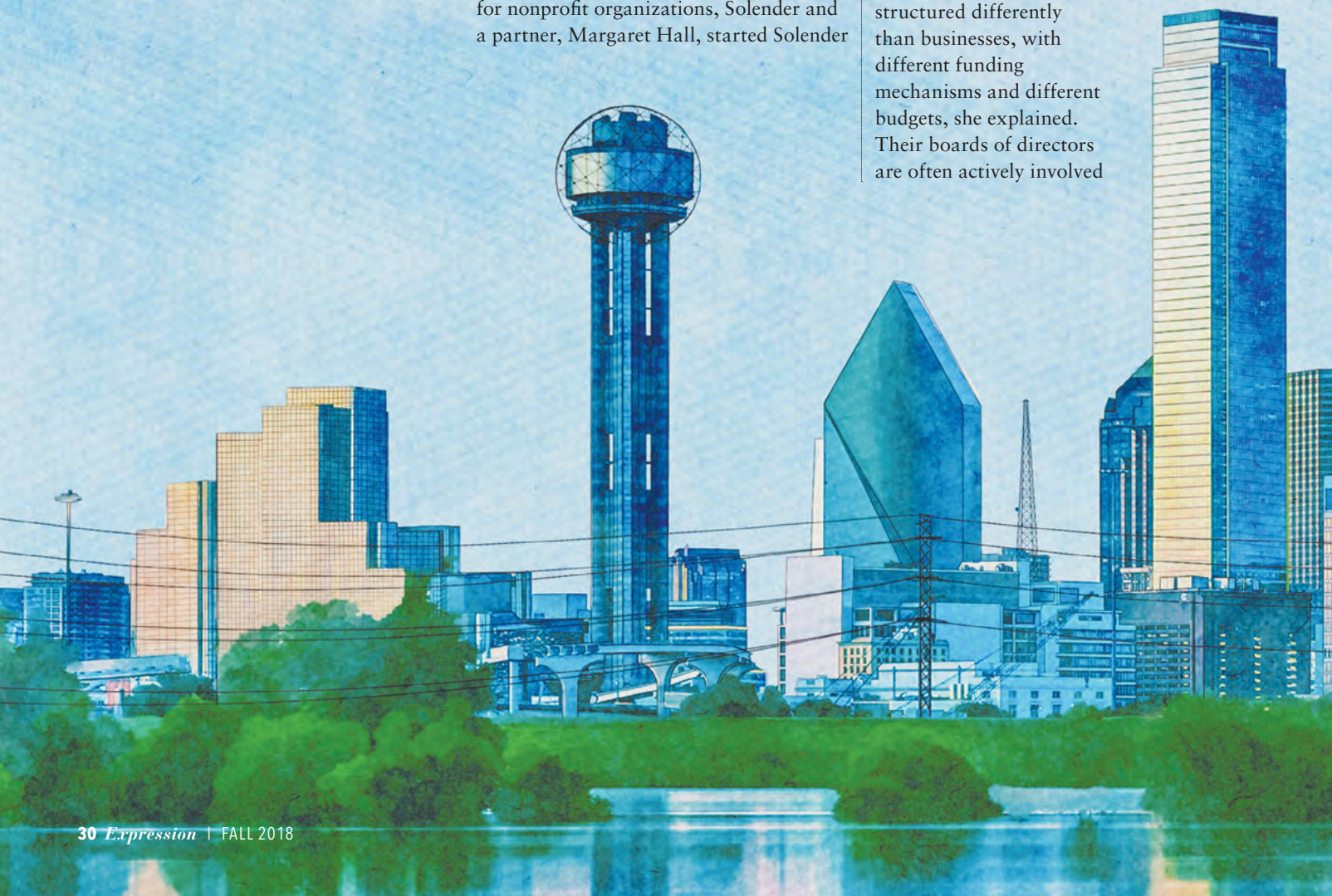
Hall, one of the first real estate companies to specialize in nonprofits.

Solender Hall, based in Dallas, provides real estate services to hundreds of charities, schools, arts organizations, medical groups, and foundations across north Texas. The firm helps organizations develop long-term strategies around physical needs, as well as lease office space, negotiate the purchase of buildings or land, and sell off surplus property.

It's a small company with a wide footprint. Solender works with her husband, Gary Scott, an attorney and real estate broker whom she met in graduate school at Purdue University, and without whom the "business wouldn't be what it is today." (Hall sold her interest in the company to Solender in 1994.)

Serving the real estate needs of nonprofits presents different challenges and opportunities than working with commercial or industrial clients, Solender said.

Nonprofits are structured differently than businesses, with different funding mechanisms and different budgets, she explained. Their boards of directors are often actively involved



in the decision-making around real estate, as are a wide range of stakeholders: staff, clients, donors, community members. Some nonprofits require special zoning, which involves working with municipalities. And working with nonprofits often requires getting creative.

Solender summoned all of her creativity and powers of persuasion in 2011, when one of her clients, Texans Can Academies, needed a place to build a new charter school in a low-income area of Dallas.

She identified a suitable site—an abandoned former school—and eventually convinced the owners, who did not live in Dallas and had no special ties to the community, to donate the property, valued at around \$1 million, to her client.

“The only reason I could do this was because I knew the school district and I was able to work with the owners,” Solender said. “To me, that was a special transaction, to get a million-dollar gift for my client.”

In addition to negotiating on behalf of her clients, for the past nine years, Solender has taught Real Estate 101 for Nonprofits to senior nonprofit executives through a professional organization called The Real Estate Council.

Prior to that, she taught communications

courses at the University of Texas at Dallas.

She also serves on the board of directors of Origin Bancorp and has sat on boards of biotech and banking firms, as well as economic development districts for the City of Dallas. She’s served on a number of advisory boards (including Emerson’s), and she’s been involved in civic, community, and national organizations, including Commercial Real Estate Women (CREW), of which she was national president and founder/chair emeritus of the CREW Foundation. In 2012, she received CREW’s highest honor, the Circle of Excellence award.

Solender started her career in the petroleum industry, working in human resources. In the late 1980s, she quit her job and joined her father at his commercial real estate company.

She became involved with the Dallas Museum of Natural History (now the Perot Museum of Nature and Science), where she chaired an exhibit of Egyptian art that drew 1.2 million spectators and netted more than \$2 million. The experience renewed her commitment to nonprofit work and put her into contact with the right people, including Hall, with whom she would go on to start a business.

Many of the threads of her professional

life lead back to Emerson College, where she learned public speaking, public relations, and how to be persuasive—skills integral to growing a successful real estate company and negotiating on behalf of her clients.

Her interest in helping nonprofits, she said, can be traced back to her senior year, when, with Dr. Coleman Bender’s class, she worked on projects having to do with organizational communications. “That experience became the nugget of how I formed my company,” she said.

At Emerson, she was allowed to create her own major, solve problems creatively, and follow her passions. And that intellectual and professional freedom was what drove her to become a pioneer in her field.

“Emerson ended up being such a good place for me because its nontraditional thinking in approaching problems... meshed with my approach,” she said.

Solender said she hopes current Emerson students realize that no matter what their major is, they’re learning skills that can be applied to the business world and beyond.

“You can forge your own [path] and use your Emerson skills in a different way.” *E*

