

From the time he first climbed into the pilot's seat at age 16, Kevin Stitt was sold on flying. "I even assumed I'd get into the aviation business," the Tulsa said recently. "I love flying. And I was always entrepreneurial." As it turned out, the aviation field was not in the cards for Stitt, who started flying at 16 after receiving lessons for his birthday. But it's part of his life story that should not be overlooked. After all, it's what brought him to Tulsa. "My first job out of college was with NORDAM," he said. Looking back 20 years later, Stitt, who grew up in Norman, can easily chart his rise and the role that Tulsa has played in it. It began with meeting his wife here "Sarah is a Tulsa native" and has grown to include a family and a business, both of which are thriving. And to the titles that go with those roles, he can now add another: governor-elect of Oklahoma. How did Stitt get to this point? Again, it goes back to Tulsa. Trusting the timing At age 27, married and with the first of his six children on the way, Stitt made a gutsy move. Having previously left NORDAM to work for a mortgage company as a loan officer, he decided to go it solo. With just "a thousand dollars and a computer" "or as a pilot might put it, a wing and a prayer" he started his own business, Gateway Mortgage, in Tulsa in 2000. It was the start of a great endeavor, the influence of which would be far-reaching. But Stitt's ascent would not come without its share of turbulence. Looking back now, he sees it as key to who he is and what he has accomplished. But that doesn't mean it was fun at the time, Stitt said. "I wanted to quit my company like a thousand times," he said. "I was really hating life." For starters, Gateway didn't immediately live up to Stitt's always-big expectations. "I was pouring everything back into it and keeping our family on a very tight budget," he said of the company's slow growth in those

early years. “I drained my savings again, had to mortgage the house.” Factor in the global financial crisis of 2007-08, which “was so hard on our industry,” and Stitt was in a “frustrating” place. He even wished he could start over, maybe go into pharmaceutical sales like friends had. But a summer job back in college “selling books door-to-door” had toughened him up: It taught him to handle rejection and to rein in runaway emotions. He stuck it out. Today, Stitt looks back on those years as providential: “Had we been bigger at the time, we’d have gone out of business like everybody else (during the crisis). You’ve just got to trust in the timing of God’s timing.” The experience helped forge the philosophy that he now applies to business and life. “God has a wonderful plan for us,” Stitt said. “Success is right around the corner. People give up just a little too early.” In Stitt’s case, not giving up too early definitely paid off.

Today, Tulsa-based Gateway is one of the country’s largest privately held mortgage companies, employing more than 1,200 at 160-plus sites nationwide. For Stitt’s friend and mentor Dave Jewitt, Gateway’s explosive growth just confirms what he’s long believed about its founder. Jewitt, who has counseled hundreds of men through his Tulsa-based leadership ministry Your One Degree, had pegged Stitt for “doing something great.” Ultimately, Stitt’s success story resonates with people because it’s a “faith story,” Jewitt added. “His faith is genuine, not a bunch of religion. And that comes across.” Believing bigger It was Stitt’s success with Gateway that paved the way for his biggest “and at first blush, unlikely” triumph yet. Running for office wasn’t an idea that cropped up overnight for the 45-year-old, who previously had no experience or even interest in politics. But he had a growing feeling that he was being “called,” he said. He wrestled with it for nearly a year, not even telling his wife for the first few months. The day he decided, he wrote it down in his journal. “March 20, 2017,” he said. Just like that, there they were “the words ‘I’m going to run

(for governor)â€• staring back at him on paper. He was committed now. No going back. Still, he felt, he could use a little affirmation. As expected, a few people told him he was â€œcrazy.â€• But those closest to him â€” who knew him best, who knew his backstory and the combination of grit and gung-ho optimism he would bring â€” had a different message. â€œThey told me Iâ€™d win,â€• Stitt said. â€œMy brothers, my wife, close friends.â€• Did he share their certainty? â€œI figured we had a really good shot,â€• he said. â€œMy story, my resume. Itâ€™s a good time to be an â€˜outsiderâ€™ politically.â€• Longtime friend Corbin McGuire, like others with an insiderâ€™s perspective on Stitt, had no doubts. Politicians sell themselves with bold proclamations about what they are going to do, but for Stitt, he felt certain, his own story would do the talking. â€œKevin has been a well-kept secret in Oklahoma for years,â€• said McGuire, who owns RNM Recruiting in Tulsa. â€œReally, itâ€™s only been (with his run for office) that the state has begun to realize what weâ€™ve got here in our own backyard.â€• McGuireâ€™s realization about Stitt â€” that he was bound for great things â€” came soon after they met in the early 1990s. Recruited by Stitt to sell books door-to-door with him during the summers out of college, â€œI learned what working looks like from him,â€• said McGuire of Stitt, who was breaking company sales records. â€œThereâ€™s no off-switch. Heâ€™s always on and going 100 miles per hour.â€• Paired to that work ethic, he added, is an ability to believe that is â€œcontagious.â€• â€œKevin always believes bigger than the next guy,â€• McGuire said. Whether itâ€™s â€œyou can sell booksâ€• or â€œwe can win the election,â€• he sets the beliefs that motivate people to achieve. Add his burning curiosity â€” one thatâ€™s always seeking how to do things better â€” and Stitt is uniquely poised to take on the role of governor, McGuire believes. â€œHeâ€™s not going to stop being Kevin. Heâ€™s going to go do incredible things. â€! All that energy and passion â€” thereâ€™s no shutting it off.â€• Jewitt, too, believes Stitt is a good fit.

He still recalls when he first told him over coffee last year that he was thinking about running. Jewitt had no trouble, he said, “seeing him doing it.” “I thought he was a long shot as an outsider,” Jewitt added. But when that “long shot” began to pull off victories, baffling political experts, “I never took that as a fluke,” he said. “I knew that Kevin would attract high-caliber people of high faith, high integrity.” “He knows he’s got a tough battle ahead,” Jewitt added. But Stitt is “people smart” and a “quick learner,” and “he’ll win a lot of people over because his motives are right.” “Not going anywhere” Four days before the Nov. 6 election, Stitt was in the middle of an interview, squeezing one in between campaign engagements, when, suddenly, it hit him. “I need to get my garlic in for next year,” he exclaimed. “I’ve been so busy. I’m probably passed the time. I know I am.” Minus the garlic, though, the outlook is generally rosy for Stitt’s agricultural pursuits. An avid gardener, he grows all kinds of things on his 115-acre spread just southwest of Tulsa, where he keeps several raised gardens. “You should see my tomatoes,” Stitt said, beaming with boyish pride. “And asparagus. Next year, we’ll have great asparagus.” He’s even added honey to the mix. After a crash course that included reading “Beekeeping for Dummies,” he installed two beehives last year. Farm living is in Stitt’s blood. It traces back to his grandfather, who was a hardworking dairy farmer. For what’s still his biggest passion, though, it’s Stitt’s dad who gets the credit. A church minister, his father had his private pilot’s license. He didn’t use it often. But once, flying to perform a funeral in Kansas, he took Stitt along. “I sat up front with him,” he said. “It was so fun.” Since learning at 16, Stitt has kept flying a part of his life. He’s owned various planes over the years and to date has racked up 2,800 flight hours. He flew to many of his campaign stops and also pilots the company plane, transporting colleagues to business meetings. If Stitt truly wanted to

take wing, thanks to the success he's attained, he could go anywhere and take his company with him. But Tulsa is home, he said. And that's not going to change. He has strong family ties to the community. And for his company, the area just makes good business sense, he said. "Plus, I love Tulsa," Stitt added. "I'm not going anywhere." Not anywhere, that is, except the Governor's Mansion. As Stitt told the World right after his victory: "It's an absolute miracle that a guy with no name recognition a year ago could be elected governor." A miracle, maybe. But not a surprise "at least not to those who know him best. From Stitt, it's exactly the kind of achievement they've come to expect. Tim Stanley 918-581-8385 tim.stanley@tulsaworld.com Twitter: @timstanleyTW Be the first to know Get local news delivered to your inbox! Sign up! * I understand and agree that registration on or use of this site constitutes agreement to its user agreement and privacy policy.