

Kelli's Journey & Impact

Early Life & Education

Kelli was born in Rome, Georgia, and grew up in a close-knit family that provided her with a strong foundation and sense of community. She fondly recalls a happy childhood. In 1992, she completed a five-year program at UNC, earning a **Bachelor of Science in Business Administration** and a **Master's in Accounting** in a single graduation ceremony — alongside Mary Margaret Frank, now dean of the UNC Kenan Flagler Business School.

Campus Memories

One of Kelli's favorite UNC memories is the dramatic transformation of the campus during the fall. She loved watching the leaves change color and walking through crunchy foliage underfoot to classes with friends.

A Japanese Detour

As a fifth-year graduate student, she had to register for both graduate business courses and undergraduate electives via phone — a tricky system without priority registration. She and a friend randomly enrolled in Japanese 101 and ended up completing two semesters. Kelli says she wishes she'd discovered the language earlier, finding it more structured and accessible than the Romance languages.

The UNC Community

Her time at UNC fostered a deep appreciation for community. The bonds she formed through the alumni network have been instrumental to her career — and seeing her son attend and graduate from UNC in 2021 (MS in Computer Science, with a French minor), and later marry a fellow Tar Heel in 2022, brought her immense pride. She believes in the strong North Carolina education system and is also proud of her younger son and his NC State Engineering master's degree.

Influential Mentors

- **Dr. Harold Langenderfer**, who taught MAC Intermediate I and II, was like a grandfather figure — patient, wise and nurturing.
- **Dr. Shackelford**, former dean, showed remarkable empathy when Kelli, stricken with stomach flu, called his home to reschedule an exam — instilling in her a sense of kindness and understanding in leadership.
- **Allen Wilson**, a retired Andersen/Grant Thornton partner, who she met during campus interviews and continued to work with through Allen's retirement.

Professional Path

Kelli began her career in tax at Arthur Andersen in Charlotte in 1992, where many of her UNC classmates also worked. In May 2002, 80% of Arthur Andersen's team in Charlotte — including Kelli — transitioned to Grant Thornton. This was a hard time professionally, but the camaraderie with colleagues resulted in a fun and fast paced career trajectory. She held many leadership positions at Grant Thornton including chairing the Partnership Board during the firm's 2024 transaction with New Mountain Capital. Kelli retired from the firm in 2025 and remains part of the governing board of firm.

Giving Back & Leadership

As a member of the UNC Tax Center Leadership Council, Kelli is driven by gratitude for her education's impact on her career. Though she never planned to stay in public accounting, she did so and thrived. She's committed to inspiring new talent and breaking down barriers — especially for women — so they can envision a long-term future in the profession.

Balancing Life & Career

Entering the field in the 1990s, Kelli witnessed few women in leadership. Through mentorship and support — both giving and receiving — she navigated raising a family, caring for aging relatives and growing professionally. Public accounting's flexibility allowed her to pace her journey and empower others. She regularly mentors men and women alike, sharing strategies for workload balance and resilience.

Vision for the Future

Kelli hopes her story encourages students and professionals to embrace public accounting as a fulfilling, flexible field. Through her ongoing leadership at the UNC Tax Center, she is helping reshape public accounting — making it more welcoming, equitable and sustainable for all.