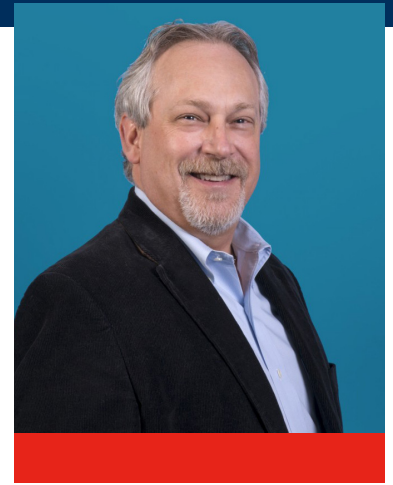


East Coast attorney moves to the beat of midsize firm

By Brian Cox



Rich Cohn first picked up a guitar when he was 10, and he will tell you that playing music most of his life has fundamentally influenced how he thinks as an attorney.

"Music helps you have your mind organized on things. It has a built-in logic to it," he says. "To me, the way I look at a document or the way I draft a lease has the same kind of organizational process as music."

Cohn is a founding shareholder of Earp Cohn P.C., a regional law firm with offices in Cherry Hill, New Jersey and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania that he formed with partner Tom Earp and two other attorneys in 1991 after deciding a "big firm" culture didn't suit his sensibilities.

His practice centers around complex commercial real estate transactions, a field of law he discovered he had a penchant for his first year at American University's Washington College of Law.



Rich Cohn and his wife Nancy are father and mother of the bride at their daughter Jenna's wedding.

"I was one of the few people I knew who really understood the rule against perpetuities," he says.

Cohn tells the story of sitting in a theater in 1981 watching the movie "Body Heat," which stars William Hurt as a less-than-proficient Florida attorney who becomes involved with a wealthy man's wife, played by a seductive Kathleen Turner, who is scheming to murder her husband. A critical plot point involves the Hurt character misinterpreting the rule against perpetuities, which allows Turner to inherit her husband's fortune.

"I knew he was going to screw up the rule against perpetuities," says Cohn, laughing. "I said, 'I see what she's doing. She's setting him up.'"

Initially drawn to international law, Cohn says his career focus turned to real estate law.

"I found that I had a real knack for understanding real property concepts and that the international legal stuff wasn't everything I hoped it would be," he says.

Cohn describes himself as the "black sheep" of the family who went into law rather than medicine. His father was a renowned surgeon at Jefferson Hospital in Philadelphia, and both his brothers became doctors, as did his daughter.

Born in Ft. Worth, Texas, where his father was stationed while in the Air Force, Cohn grew up in west Philadelphia before the family moved to a suburb when he was around 12. He spent his summers at a camp in New Hampshire, where he now has a second home and where he and his wife, Nancy, spend as much time as possible.

"It just feels right," says Cohn. "You have this context of being part of nature."

Cohn and his wife met their freshman year at Dickinson College when he and some friends were driving home to Philadelphia to see Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention. Nancy hitched a ride with them on her way home to South Jersey to see her boyfriend at the time. Cohn and Nancy spent the ride in the backseat making each other laugh. They started dating the following spring and got married Cohn's second year in law school. The couple recently celebrated their 40th wedding anniversary.

"We're two of the lucky ones," he says. "We like each other."

After Cohn earned his law degree and Nancy got her MBA from George Washington, the young couple moved to Corpus Christi, Texas, largely as a change of scenery from the Northeast where they had both spent their lives. Cohn joined a small firm made up of 25 lawyers, the majority of whom were former big firm lawyers from Houston or Dallas who had wanted to get out of the big firm lifestyle and spend more time sailing.

"They were great lawyers," says Cohn. "I learned a whole lot down there in a couple of years."

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Before long, however, Cohn and Nancy decided to move back to South Jersey to be closer to family and Cohn landed a job with one of the largest law firms in Philadelphia.

He hated the work environment almost immediately, finding it acrimonious and a stark departure from the collegial atmosphere he experienced at the firm in Corpus Christi.

"I was literally there for a week, and it was such a culture shock," say Cohn. "I was like if this is what practicing law in the Northeast is going to be, I'm going to have to do something else. I'm not going to be able to be a lawyer up here."

He stuck it out for a year before looking for a new firm.

"I didn't want to work for another big firm, I knew that," he says.

His wife encouraged him to seek a position with Archer & Greiner, one of the most established law firms in New Jersey, which has an office in her home town of Haddonfield. A business law firm with around 70 attorneys, it proved a good fit for Cohn for several years before its personality began to take on "big firm" characteristics and priorities that didn't align with how Cohn felt law should be practiced.

As the opportunity to make partner approached, Cohn was faced with a critical decision.

"I started to think I've been holding out for this little gold ring for all these years, and now that it's here is this really where I want to be the rest of my life?" he asked himself. "This is the kind of firm I said I didn't want to be in."

After connecting with Tom Earp, a Harvard Law grad who was the head of the firm's corporate department, and learning that he, too, was dissatisfied with the firm's new direction, Cohn made up his mind. He would venture out and start a new firm. He was 31 years old with three kids under the age of 5.

"It was really a leap of faith," he says.

Cohn and Earp knew from the outset that they wanted to create a law firm where the client came first.

"My view is we're a service industry," says Cohn. "I always felt the client should be the most important thing. Not the billable hour. Our view is that the client is what we should focus on."

Cohn quickly found that his focus on the client and his ability to listen to their needs and solve problems brought work to his door. Clients that had been with his previous firm for years sought him out.

A real estate holding subsidiary of the largest utility company in New Jersey was his first big client. He started doing the subsidiary's lease work, which became the backbone of his practice. Soon, mostly through word-of-mouth, he was negotiating and drafting commercial lease work for dozens of clients, who trusted him because he knew what was important to them and what wasn't.

"That's why my clients like me," he says. "Because I listen to them, and apparently a lot of lawyers don't do that."

Cohn gets animated when discussing the philosophy and outlook he tries to instill in young litigators at Earp Cohn P.C.

"Most people would rather have root canal surgery than be involved in litigation," he tells his associates. "It's the scariest thing that's ever happened to them. They're not sleeping at night. You've got to understand this is the biggest thing on their minds. You've got to make sure you explain things to them and keep them calm."

He says doing great work is expected. Great work is a given. He wants his associates to understand that they need to be good and attentive servants to their clients.



Rich Cohn fishes with his dog Charley on Messer Pond near their home in New London, New Hampshire.

"You've got to be good counsel to these people," he says with passion. "You've got to be trusted counsel. It's not just doing the work. You're providing a service to these people. They're spending a lot of money for you to give them advice and it's because they need advice. They don't know what to do and they're looking to you to provide that service to them. That's the approach we've always had. The clients come first."

Cohn says the firm joined Primerus in 2012 because he found that it is made up of firms with a similar mindset and philosophy and that the organization creates opportunities for firms of Earp Cohn's size to attract clients who might otherwise look to a larger firm to fulfill their needs.

"Every Primerus firm that I've ever had the pleasure of dealing with, they're excellent law firms and they're really down to earth people," he says. "I've got people I consider some of my best friends that I've met through Primerus. I never thought I'd be looking forward to hanging out with a bunch of lawyers."

Now with 25 attorneys at Earp Cohn, some of whom are likely to retire in the coming years, Cohn says the firm is grappling with the question of succession. Most firms have a finite life, he says, and he and his partners recently had to ask themselves if they wanted to build a firm that was going to be able to sustain itself for another generation. They decided they did, and that goal brings new challenges, including mentoring and training younger attorneys and a willingness to delegate work to them.

"Delegating is the hardest thing for most really good lawyers," says Cohn. "If you're really good at something, it can be hard to convince your clients they can trust someone else and it's hard to trust you can delegate to a younger attorney and they'll do it the right way."

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The firm is also striving to be more diverse as it evolves and positions itself for the future.

“To have a diversity of viewpoints in a firm adds value,” says Cohn.

Cohn and Nancy have four grandchildren. Nancy retired from teaching middle school science a few years ago. His oldest son, Michael, is a mortgage underwriter in York, Pennsylvania; his daughter is a family doctor in Philadelphia; and his youngest child, Stephen, is an engineer and project manager near State College, Pennsylvania.

Except for a hiatus of several years when his children were young and he was building his practice, Cohn has kept up playing the guitar. Until the pandemic shut down live music venues, he performed one or two gigs a month with Mother Zeta, a band he started with a college friend more than a decade ago. He describes the band’s style as “psychedelic-era classic rock for the discriminating palate.”

“This is something I can still do and really enjoy it,” he says. “If you could come close to making a living doing it, it’d be hard to pass up.”

As for retirement, Cohn says he’s waiting for Keith Richards to retire first. Who knows? Maybe the Stones will give him a call. If they do, he’ll be ready, and Mother Zeta will need a new lead guitarist.



Rich Cohn is the lead guitarist and singer with his band Mother Zeta. Other band members include Seth Baer on drums; Harris London on bass; Chuck Stokes on guitar; and Mitch Pinheiro.