

# Law firm's former managing partner relishes expanding role as a mentor

By Brian Cox



From several years serving as general counsel for a telecommunications company, attorney James ("Jim") Neeld, IV knows what it's like to sit on the other side of the table as a client. That perspective has fundamentally formed his practice and how he approaches the concerns of his own clients.

He understands that a client has a problem they simply need solved. They don't need their attorney to write them a treatise, redefine the issues, or hand them a lengthy memo discussing all the "on the other hands." Clients want answers, practical advice, responsiveness, and communication, says Neeld.

"That perspective has been tremendously helpful," Neeld says. "It's something that anytime I'm hired by somebody to help them with a knotty problem, I really do try to remember."

It is from this perspective that he tells his partners and associates that while cost is certainly on the list of concerns for

clients, it is usually not the first thing on the list. "I would gladly pay more to have an experienced lawyer give me a prompt answer I have confidence in, than to pay less to get an answer I'm not that sure about," he says.

His time as a general counsel was a bit of a sabbatical from Young Wells Williams P.A., the law firm he joined right after graduating from the University of Mississippi School of Law — more commonly referred to as Ole Miss Law — and where he was the president for 14 years, until just recently handing over the reins to another shareholder.

As still a young lawyer in the late 1990s, Neeld at one point found he was spending nearly 90 percent of his time on one client, Tritel, Inc., a company founded by local wireless industry veterans including one of the law firm's former partners, E.B. Martin, Jr. Through a newly established auction process, the founders acquired new FCC licenses for wireless spectrum and then entered into a strategic partnership with AT&T Wireless to provide a next generation of digital wireless service, Personal Communications Service (PCS). When the company approached him to be its general counsel and secretary, it was an opportunity Neeld couldn't pass up. Over the next few years, it was a whirlwind as he helped steer the company through growing from twelve to hundreds of employees, a substantial private equity raise, a high yield bond offering, and ultimately, an initial public offering.

"The capital we raised was a staggering amount," he recalls, putting it in excess of \$1.3 billion. "It was just an amazing experience - a rollercoaster ride. Here's a guy who grew up in a small Mississippi Delta town, went to Ole Miss, and now I'm spending half my time in Manhattan, working with Goldman Sachs, Merrill Lynch, and top-tier, global law firms. I owe a lot to founders E.B. Martin and Billy Mounger for their placing that level of confidence in me."

Soon after the IPO, Neeld worked to orchestrate a merger with another regional affiliate of AT&T Wireless before returning to Young Wells Williams P.A. — with a broadened understanding of clients' expectations and the ability to put himself in his clients' shoes.

"Whether it's a two-hundred-thousand-dollar deal or a hundred-million-dollar deal, everybody wants and deserves that high level of attention and communication," he says. "It may not be the biggest problem you've ever worked on, but it may be the biggest problem they've ever had."

Neeld was born and raised in Yazoo City, Miss., a town of around 10,000 residents that is located on the lower edge of the



Jim Neeld hikes in Banff National Park in Alberta, Canada.

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Mississippi Delta; a place he describes as a “unique part of the world” and as a land of extremes that contrasts rich agricultural land, beautiful nature and hospitality with incredible poverty.

“It’s been that way for a long time,” he says. “I’ve heard it described as ‘the most southern place on earth.’”

Neeld’s path to the legal profession was strongly influenced by his father, who for almost 50 years was general counsel for Cal-Maine Foods, Inc., the country’s largest producer of fresh eggs and which is now headquartered across the street from Young Wells’ office in Ridgeland, Mississippi.



**Jim Neeld sails with his grand-nephew, Luke Wells. Neeld owns a Catalina 28 that he sails on the Ross Barnett Reservoir.**

“I remember him traveling to Iran, Nigeria, the Netherlands – all over the place,” says Neeld. “That certainly rubbed off on me as an impressionable boy to think ‘hey, this corporate law business might be kind of fun in some respects.’ He was definitely a big influence on me.”

His mother was an “incredibly bright, quintessential Southern belle” who attended Stephens College, a private women’s college in Columbia, Missouri, before graduating from Ole Miss. He has one brother who owns and operates a hardware store.

Majoring in accounting in college, Neeld initially planned to become an accountant, but that changed after an internship with one of the Big 8 accounting firms.

“I’ll never forget,” says Neeld, “they had me mostly going out on these awful audits in little towns all over Mississippi, auditing some government programs and, with apologies to all my accountant friends, it was dull and painfully repetitive.”

A law career seemed a far better alternative and immediately following graduation, he enrolled in law school with plans on becoming a tax attorney.

“I’ve always been interested in the business side of things and how people build businesses,” he says.

When Neeld began law school, Mississippi offered the “diploma privilege,” which meant Ole Miss Law graduates were not required to take the bar exam in order to practice, but the state

discontinued the practice as Neeld approached graduation.

“I had the privilege of being in the very first class from Ole Miss that had to take the Bar,” he says with a laugh. “Luckily, I made it through on the first try so all was good.”

After graduation, Neeld had the opportunity to join his father, who was then working at a private law firm in Jackson, but Neeld wasn’t sure it was the right choice for him.

“I knew if I worked for my dad I’d always be thought of as ‘Jimmy Neeld’s son,’ who didn’t get the job on his merits,” Neeld says. “I didn’t want to deal with that. I wanted to see if I could do it on my own.”

Instead, Young Wells made him an offer and Neeld took it. The firm had an aggressive approach when it came to young lawyers and tended to throw them into the deep end to sink or swim. Neeld rotated through a variety of areas, doing a little bit of everything, before concluding his talents and interests were on the business side.

“I’ve always for sure felt that I am a better business lawyer, by far, having had a variety of experiences,” he says. “It gives you a new perspective when you’re drafting a contract if you’ve had to go to court and sue to enforce a contract and know what it’s like to have to explain to a judge or a jury what’s going on or what was meant.”

Serendipitously, while Neeld opted out of joining the law firm where his father worked, a few years later, his father made a lateral move and joined Young Wells Williams P.A. The father and son had the chance to practice together until Neeld’s father retired in 2012.

“It was great to soak up his pearls of wisdom,” says Neeld, “but the best part was me getting to tell folks, ‘I hired my old man!’”

The law firm, founded in 1962 by James Leon Young and his father, J. Will Young, currently has 12 attorneys who focus primarily on business and corporate law and commercial litigation. Mergers and acquisitions are a large percentage of Neeld’s work, along with securities, corporate finance, and commercial transactions.

“We’re a very collegial firm,” says Neeld. “We’re small enough that we all get to know each other and get to see each other a lot. I have been blessed to have some very good partners over the years.”

An early mentor was Jimmy Young, one of the firm’s founders, who Neeld describes as a hardnose litigator who zealously represented his clients. “I learned an incredible amount from



**Jim Neeld and his wife, Jenny, reach the summit on a mountain hike in Jasper National Park in Canada. The couple have traveled to numerous national parks**

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**Jim Neeld enjoys hunting white-tail deer and turkeys at a 300-acre hunting camp he owns north of Jackson, MS.**

him about how to deal with people, what motivates people, how to negotiate with people, and different negotiating styles,” says Neeld. “I really respected his dogged determination to get the best result he could for his client.”

The firm joined Primerus last year and Neeld attended his first regional conference in Houston in June and is attending its Global Conference in San Diego in October.

“I think meeting and getting to know people one-on-one and developing the relationships is really the best way to get something out of Primerus,” he says. “So far we have had occasions to enlist the aid of other Primerus members on some sophisticated projects in Texas and Louisiana and have been thankful they were available and did such a good job of assisting us.”

In addition, Neeld has found Primerus’ practice groups helpful and informative. He recently sat in on a virtual session of the Cannabis Practice Group, which he considers a valuable resource as Mississippi adopted a medical cannabis program last year, and Neeld has clients who are involved in the field. Gaining expertise on the industry was necessary so that Neeld could describe for his clients and investors all the risks and regulatory requirements.

“It’s nice to have the practice groups to hone your skills and learn a little bit more,” he says. “On calls and at meetings you’re always going to pick up a nugget or two. It’s nice to be able to talk and share war stories with experienced practitioners who have tips on dealing with particular kinds of situations.”

As the firm considers the future, Neeld says it has its eye on laying the groundwork for an effective succession, which requires mentoring and fostering young lawyers to prepare them to take over the helm.

“A client is a relationship,” says Neeld. “You have to start letting your younger folks develop some of those relationships with clients. The best way of servicing a client is to be sure their needs

are timely covered. So, if I’m not available, I want our client to feel comfortable calling somebody down the hall and getting done what needs to be done.”

The biggest challenge the law firm faces in that regard is retaining talented attorneys, who after gaining experience might be tempted by opportunities elsewhere.

“I think that’s a tribute to the firm and the way we recruit quality people and get them trained that they are in such a demand, but at the same time it’s a challenge to hang on to folks,” says Neeld.

Neeld and his wife, Jenny, married in 1983, his last year of law school. The couple met while undergrads at Ole Miss where she was an education major. They have three sons: Quinten, Wells, and Graham. Quinten is engaged and Wells is married. “We’re kind of impatiently tapping our fingers waiting on grandkids,” jokes Neeld.

Away from the law office, Neeld enjoys boating, cycling, hunting, and attending live music events. He’s a self-described audiophile, who loves high-end stereo equipment systems and has a large vinyl record collection that he’s been growing since the 1970s.

His family has a long history with boats. He spent many childhood days on a retired 95-foot Coast Guard ship that his grandfather converted into an excursion boat. On weekends his grandfather would take tourists on short trips up and down the Yazoo and Mississippi Rivers around Vicksburg. Neeld’s father raced wooden runabouts that sported outboard motors with tuned “megaphone” exhaust pipes and also introduced his son to sailing. Neeld has sailed all manner of boats, from catamarans to Lasers, Sunfish, and Catalinas. He currently owns a Catalina 28 that he sails on the Barnett Reservoir, which serves as the state’s largest drinking water resource. He and Jenny fulfilled a lifelong dream



**A cycling enthusiast, Jim Neeld celebrates with fellow cyclists Tommy Louis (left) and Bob Walker (right) at the end of a Bike, Blues & Bayous Ride in Greenwood, MS.**

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three years ago when they bought a home on the lake. "I can just feel my blood pressure come down when I come home, see that water, and jump on the boat," says Neeld.

He also has a hunting camp that sits on 300 acres in Holmes County, north of Jackson, where he hunts deer and turkey with his sons and 87-year-old father, who just two years ago bagged his first deer. "Going up and spending a cold, crisp day in a hunting stand, watching the sun rise or set, seeing all the wildlife, is a great way to detach from the pressures of the law practice," he says.

Neeld and his wife make it a goal every year to travel someplace where they have to wear a sweater in July or August to get away from the Mississippi heat and humid "air you can wear." They've visited numerous national parks, Italy, Israel, Alaska, and Maine, and love chasing sunsets and waterfalls.

The couple have also been involved with the Society of St. Vincent de Paul for more than 13 years. He is currently the local organization's vice president and she is the secretary. The society's mission involves visiting people in their homes who are in need, providing assistance, and encouraging the spiritual growth of its members.

"I can truly tell you that when you go out and are sitting face-to-face with some of the neediest people that you will ever meet, inside their home, it changes your perspective," says Neeld. "If you're in a position to be able to provide some help, they're thankful, but I'm going to tell you, it's doing way more for me than it's doing for them."



**Mississippi attorney Jim Neeld enjoys attending live music events. Here, he is backstage at a Widespread Panic concert with his brother Bubba Neeld (far left) and John Bell, singer/guitarist for the band.**