

# New York attorney sports deep capital connections

By Brian Cox



Attorney Justin Heller has roots in Albany, NY, that reach back generations to around the turn of the 20th century. The Heller family history is intertwined with the history of the state capital and its legal community.

Heller is the current curator of that family history and as managing partner of Nolan Heller Kauffman LLP he is ensuring the continuation of the family's legal legacy.

Heller's grandfather, Julius Heller, was a longtime reporter for The Knickerbocker News, who for decades chronicled some of the city's most significant events, including the killing of Jack "Legs" Diamond, a notorious gangster and bootlegger who was assassinated in 1931 in an Albany rooming house. After World War II, he traveled to Nijmegen, Netherlands, to report on a goodwill mission Albany organized to deliver tons of needed supplies and construction materials to help rebuild the war-torn city. The charitable effort resulted in Albany and Nijmegen becoming sister cities.

The trip also inspired Julius to suggest to Albany's mayor at the time, Erastus Corning, that the city start an annual Tulip Festival in celebration of the city's Dutch heritage and its relationship with Nijmegen. Albany's first Tulip Festival was held in 1949 and now draws tens of thousands of visitors each year. Later in his career, Julius Heller covered the courts and knew all the significant lawyers and judges in town.

When Justin Heller started practicing law, he remembers occasionally running into older attorneys who were contemporaries of his grandfather. He laughs when he recalls a retired personal injury lawyer telling him, "Your grandfather could make a curb look two feet high," referring to a side business Julius had as a photographer.

Heller's father, Mark Heller, deepened the family's connection



An experienced skier, Justin Heller poses on the legendary High Rustler Trail in Alta, Utah, one of the state's steepest ski runs at more than 1,000 vertical feet.

to the legal community by joining it. A Harvard Law grad, he became a corporate lawyer and founded Nolan & Heller in 1964.

"One of their primary areas of work was in banking and to this day that is one of our core practice areas," says Heller.

Today, the business law firm has built a reputation as one of the top law firms in Upstate New York's Capital Region and represents companies, business owners, entrepreneurs, start-ups, real estate owners, developers, publicly traded companies, banks, and other financial institutions.

Heller joined the firm in 1990 after graduating from Albany Law School of Union University. His path to a legal career was not a direct one, though. He first thought he might enjoy working with animals in some capacity so he journeyed out to the Midwest to attend Ohio Wesleyan University because it had a strong zoology program.

He soon discovered, however, that he had a stronger interest in business than animals and after graduation he returned to Albany where he joined a management training program and worked in commercial banking for two years. He credits the experience with sparking his interest in law. He was able to interact with a range of people in the business community and observed the different roles people played. He particularly noted the essential role of the commercial lawyers.

"I liked the fact that lenders really needed and sought the input of the lawyers," says Heller. "The lawyers were the problem-solvers. There was a quarterbacking quality to it that I liked."

Once the inspiration to be a lawyer came to him, Heller says he couldn't get out of banking and into law school fast enough.

There is an intellectual challenge to the career that appeals to him.

"It takes a combination of your personality and your ability to exude confidence," he says. "Interpersonal skills are critically important. You add into that communication skills, problem-solving skills, and substantive knowledge of fairly difficult material."

It is a combination, he says, that he still finds exciting after 32 years of practice.

After law school, Heller considered joining firms in New York City and Washington, DC, but in the end – like Dorothy discovered in Oz – there was no place better than home.

"This firm had tremendous name recognition and a strong reputation," he says. "It was in my interest to get involved here where I've got roots rather than starting out someplace else."

In a purposeful way, Heller was assigned to work with a partner who ran the commercial litigation, bankruptcy and insolvency practice rather than his father, who ran the corporate practice.

"It was the best of both worlds because I could work near my father but we weren't working directly together typically, which

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is a nice distance for a father and son,” he says. “I think we both enjoyed being under the same roof but without what could be the challenge of actually working together.”

The core of Heller’s practice remains commercial litigation, bankruptcy and insolvency issues. He has decades of experience representing borrowers in workouts and litigation, and regularly serves as debtor’s counsel in Chapter 11 bankruptcy proceedings. Another significant portion of his practice is devoted to a broad range of commercial and business litigation in state and federal court and in arbitration.

On reflection, Heller says that over the years he has developed a more mature and friendly approach to practicing. As a young attorney, he could at times be more combative than collaborative.

“I think when I was younger, if somebody said something I didn’t like, I could fly off the handle a little bit,” he says. “I think as I’ve gotten older, I’m way more laid back. Life experience gives you the perspective not to sweat the small stuff.”

It is a perspective that has served him well as a managing partner who has had to respond and adapt to changes in the legal landscape, including a more prevalent appreciation for work-life balance among younger attorneys and an emerging hybrid office environment that includes remote working necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

“I definitely came up in an environment where you worked your ass off,” he says. “When I was coming up, I would not leave my office until the partner down the hall left. I might have given him a 30-second head start but I was going to be seen leaving after him.”



**Albany attorney Justin Heller biked from Pittsburgh to Washington D.C. last summer with his daughter Lauren**

Now, young attorneys seem less willing to work under that demanding expectation and Heller sees some positivity in this development.

“In life you don’t remember another day at the office – you remember the other stuff,” he says. “I feel like in this country we work too much. Life’s too short.”

With 14 attorneys, the firm has adopted a hybrid work-from-home model where people are expected to be in the office three days a week. The arrangement fosters a better work-life balance and provides flexibility.

“Instead of making your domestic life revolve around your work life, you can make your work life revolve around your domestic life to some extent,” says Heller.

The firm has always been vigilant about keeping up with technological capabilities and so when the pandemic struck in early 2020, adjusting to working remotely was not a jarring experience. The firm arranged for everyone to have laptops, dual monitors, printers, and scanners at home.

“You have all the same tools at home that you have at the office,” says Heller. “When COVID hit, I don’t think we lost any productivity at all.”

An unexpected consequence of the pandemic, however, was how it erased geographic borders and affected the firm’s recruiting. In the past, the firm had found fertile recruiting ground among attorneys who worked for top tier law firms in New York City but were ready for a lifestyle change away from the city and wanted to move upstate.

“But now it’s a little different because you can sit in Albany and work for a New York City firm, servicing their NYC-based



**Justin Heller and his wife Ruth enjoy traveling and last year toured Munich, which included stops at a beer hall or two.**



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clients who are accustomed to paying higher legal fees,” says Heller. “There’s a lot going on in that whole area that is adding new challenges to recruiting.”

The firm has been a Primerus member since 2018 and Heller is looking to better leverage the society as a resource. The ability to confidently and efficiently refer a client to a Primerus member is a powerful tool that allows the firm to meet a client’s broader needs.

“An unexpected area of benefit has been the ability to call somebody up and ask some questions to try to learn a little more about an issue,” says Heller. “It’s been really helpful. People are consistently happy to do that. It’s kind of the Primerus way.”

In addition to enjoying bicycling, Heller is an avid tennis player who is on the court any chance he gets. He and his wife, Ruth, try to attend the U.S. Open every year.

“I love it. I can’t get enough of it,” says Heller of his tennis interest. “I think I’m getting better. It’s nice to feel you’re still ascending and not descending.”

Heller also is an experienced skier. As an avid skier since he was a youth, Heller says a love of the sport is ingrained in his family.

He and Ruth met in law school at Albany School of Union University. Both her father and grandfather were lawyers, and her father knew Heller’s uncle from when the two attended Harvard Law together. She joined Nolan Heller Kauffman in 2018 and works primarily with a New York agency that administers the state’s grant program.

The couple has three children, who have all migrated from Albany for now. Their oldest son, Sam, is an employment recruiter in Boston. Their daughter, Emily, lives in Nashville where she is a financial analyst. And their youngest, Lauren, is finishing up her master’s degree at Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh.

Heller’s interests continue to evolve. After years of being a Classic Rock ‘n’ Roll devotee, he’s recently become a fan of Bluegrass music and has just created a small workshop in his basement where he has a lathe to try his hand at woodturning.

“My wife is just dismayed,” he laughs. “She can’t believe that all of a sudden I listen to Bluegrass and I’m turning wood on a lathe.”



Justin Heller and his daughter Lauren hiked the Catskill Mountains last year.