

# Firm's managing partner sees joy in lifelong learning process

By Brian Cox

Attorney Christian Stegmaier is an Eagle Scout. And a major in the South Carolina State Guard where he is the staff judge advocate in command of its JAG detachment.

It should come as little surprise then that Stegmaier holds the principle of fairness in the highest regard and that a sense of fairness is foundational to his practice of law.

"I still believe in the notion of fairness," says Stegmaier, who is the managing partner at Collins & Lacy, P.C. in Columbia.

He has been with the defense litigation firm for 23 years. It is the first and only firm he has worked for over the course of his career.

"I try very hard to be fair with everybody I deal with, whether they're co-defendants or plaintiffs," Stegmaier says.

"We treat people appropriately and with respect," he adds. "We're intellectually and academically honest in the positions we take in our litigation. Cases can be very adversarial, but I never want anyone to think we did anything untoward in discovery or held something back or sandbagged them. We try very hard to be straight up from beginning to end."



Christian Stegmaier, his wife Paige and their two daughters, Ella, 17, and Grace, 19, at Paige's family's homeplace on Lake Murray in South Carolina.



Reared and educated in South Carolina's capital city, Stegmaier is a son of Columbia. He touts the city as a "great place to live and a great place to raise a family." Growing up, he was active in Boy Scouts and developed an early interest in politics by taking part in various campaigns for governor and the state General Assembly.

At the University of South Carolina, he studied political science and then earned a master's degree in Public Health Administration with the aim of managing hospitals. It was a short-lived ambition, however. It was only two years into the work that he realized he was spending the majority of his time reviewing contracts and that he may as well go to law school.

After graduating from the University of South Carolina School of Law, Stegmaier accepted a clerkship with Judge Ralph King Anderson Jr. on the state's Court of Appeals. Before his election to the appellate court, Anderson had served a term in the state House of Representatives and sat as a circuit court judge for 17 years. The judge's influence on Stegmaier is nearly incalculable and he says the experience "informs every day of my life." The judge modeled for Stegmaier the importance of a committed work ethic, tenacity, thoroughness, an academic approach to the job, and a love of the law.

"I thought I'd learned something in law school," says Stegmaier, "but I realized I didn't learn anything compared to what I learned in those two years of my clerkship."

Considering his next move as he neared the end of the clerkship, Stegmaier elected to write a letter to Joel Collins, the co-founder of Collins & Lacy, P.C., who was also the father of one of Stegmaier's childhood friends from Boy Scouts. In the letter, he wrote that as a kid he knew Collins was a great lawyer and said he would love to talk with him about any opportunities at the firm.

"I looked up to him as a leader in our community," says Stegmaier. "There is not a more tireless advocate in South Carolina than Joel Collins."

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Stegmaier's admiration for Collins was well placed. Before starting his own practice in 1982, Collins had served four years in the Army Judge Advocate General's Corps, including one year in Vietnam where he was awarded the Bronze Star and Army Commendation Medals. Collins had been an assistant professor at West Point and the Assistant U.S. Attorney for the District of South Carolina. In 2018, he received the Governor's Order of the Palmetto Award, the state's highest civilian honor that is presented to citizens for remarkable service and contribution to South Carolina and its residents. Collins now serves as president of the new Primerus™ Foundation.

"I consider Joel to be a second father," says Stegmaier. "He's a tremendous mentor. I'm honored to be the managing partner of the firm he started. I can't envision a future where I'm not a part of this firm."

In addition to his personal admiration for Collins, Stegmaier was attracted to the firm by its established reputation as defense litigators.

"We are 100 percent litigation," he says. "It's what we've always been, it's probably what we'll always be."

When he first joined the firm, Stegmaier says litigation was less focused and specialized. He considered himself a general litigator, but as business and clients became more sophisticated, clients increasingly expected a lawyer to have a track record in a particular area. The law firm responded by developing a limited range of practice groups.

"We're very focused on retail and hospitality, trucking defense, insurance coverage disputes, professional liability, and construction defense," says Stegmaier. "If you come to us, you can be rest assured that the lawyer handling your file is well versed and experienced in that particular area."

Stegmaier largely represents hotels, restaurants, clubs, and retailers and his primary practice areas include alcohol liability, premises liability, third-party assaults, and some regulatory work as well. He chairs the firm's Retail and Hospitality Practice Group.

"I don't hold myself out as an intellectual property lawyer, I don't know anything about bankruptcy, I don't do family court work, but if you've got an alcohol liability-related case in South Carolina, I'd like to think I'm one of the more knowledgeable people who can defend a case like that," he says.

The firm's membership in Primerus™ is one of the resources that allows it to maintain its focus on what the firm does best. Having joined Primerus in 1996, Collins & Lacy is one of its oldest members and was its first law firm in South Carolina. In 2012, Primerus honored Collins with a Lifetime Achievement Award for his longtime support and service to Primerus and that same year the firm received the Community Service Award for its numerous



**Attorney Christian Stegmaier with his wife Paige and their two daughters Grace (seated left) and Ella on vacation in St. Lucia last year.**

community service events and active involvement with local charitable and civic organizations.

"Primerus™ is very much an expansion of what we're able to do," says Stegmaier. "What we're able to do from a geographic standpoint is enlarge our scope and help the clients we already have existing relationships with and know they're going to be in good hands with a Primerus lawyer."

The firm also has a vibrant appellate practice that Stegmaier heads up. He has appeared in over 45 appeals in the last two decades. He says he enjoys the "intellectual tennis match" of appellate work.

"I look forward to it," says Stegmaier, his eyes lighting up. "It's very fast paced. It's a balancing act. It takes technique and an understanding of nuance that can only be gained through experience."

And that experience he can offer a client can be of immeasurable value during dispute resolution with a recalcitrant plaintiff.

"One thing I bring to the table is all right, you might try the case and get the verdict you want, but you're still going to have to bring it back to Columbia and defend it in the Court of Appeals and then you're in my home court," he says.



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Stegmaier has not lost the interest in politics he developed way back in middle school. In 2018, he ran for the State Senate, and in 2022, he threw his hat in the ring for a seat in the State House of Representatives. His campaigns came up a little short each time, but he says he gave them “the old college try.”

“My position is that we probably can’t have enough lawyers in our legislature because lawyers have the education, the experience, the intellectual and academic know-how to be involved in complicated issues and legislation,” says Stegmaier. “My experience has been that the folks who are effective members of the General Assembly are also legally trained.”

In addition to learning during his two campaigns that it takes a thick skin to run for public office, Stegmaier says he learned who his friends are and was pleased that he was able to find support on both sides of the bar. He connects that support to his reputation for fairness.

“I would like to think that is a testament to my reputation as a lawyer and my character as a person,” he says.

He has not ruled out taking another shot at public office if the time and opportunity presents itself.

“Maybe one fine day we’ll see if we can get the band back together,” Stegmaier says.

He and his wife, Paige, have two children, Grace and Ella. Grace is a graduate of Chapin High School and is a freshman at the Honors College at Clemson University, studying finance and accounting. Ella is a sophomore at Spring Hill High School and is interested in design and hospitality. Paige is an actuary for a large insurer. The Stegmaiers live in Hilton and are members of New Hope Lutheran Church in Irmo where he has served as president of the congregation.

Stegmaier says the recent COVID pandemic created an existential crisis for many of the firm’s clients, especially those in the hospitality, restaurant, and entertainment sectors. Attorneys spent considerable time on the front end reviewing executive orders from the governor and counseling clients on “left and right parameters.”

“We were doing what we could to make life a little easier for our clients because they were stressed out,” he says. “Our clients have an interest in moving their litigation along. So, we never shut down. We were pushing cases as quickly as possible to get those liabilities off our clients’ balance sheets.”

While it was a challenging time litigating cases remotely, Stegmaier does point to two positive effects of remote work: Many judges continue to handle routine motions via Zoom, which saves clients time and money; and mediation, which prior to the pandemic required a client’s physical presence, can now be scheduled faster, is conducted more efficiently and is less costly.



**Christian Stegmaier, his wife Paige and their two daughters Grace (left) and Ella attended the the 2022 Orange Bowl in Miami where the Clemson Tigers battled the Tennessee Volunteers. Grace is a fourth generation Clemson on her mother's side.**

What Stegmaier thinks may be a negative consequence of the pandemic is that a large swath of the American people appears mad and aggravated. Maybe it’s caused by the political or economic climate, but Stegmaier says the frustration with government and institutions may be manifesting in unreasonably large jury verdicts.

“We’ve noticed some completely unexpected verdicts post-COVID. We are paying a lot of attention to what is getting tried around the state, paying a lot of attention to verdicts and we’re trying to let clients know there are hot spots,” he says. “I can’t put an exact finger on it, but I talk with colleagues around the country and South Carolina is not immune to it.”

A self-described lifelong learner, Stegmaier recently applied to the University of California, Davis for its executive MBA program.

“My next act is getting another college degree,” he says. “I’m excited about that. My plan is to study organizational leadership

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and strategic management. The academic experience I can get from that I plan to put to good use for our law firm."

With a little more than 20 lawyers, Collins & Lacy is the 25th largest law firm in the state. Next year, it will celebrate its 40th anniversary, and as the firm's managing partner, Stegmaier is passionate about his duty to guide the firm into the future.

When it comes to attracting and nurturing legal talent that will sustain the firm into the future, Stegmaier says it can be a challenge: "There are a lot of lawyers and then there are the lawyers you want working at your firm." He says the firm is committed to investing heavily in its lawyers' development and maturation, ensuring that they feel fairly treated and valued.

"We put a lot of money back into the firm so that people are attracted to come here to begin with and so they're motivated to stay," he says. "The people we attract, we fight like hell to keep them."

Collins & Lacy is entering its third generation as a law firm, and Stegmaier is committed to securing the firm's viability for future generations.

"What motivates me now, what engages me, what enlivens me, is we have hired within the last 5 to 10 years some fantastic lawyers who we've developed and who are becoming great trial lawyers," he says. "We're getting to the point of being able to turn things over to them. What animates me is this is my professional reputation. It's completely intertwined with this law firm and I want to leave things better than when I found it."

He expands on that vision by saying: "We're proud of our past. We're even more excited about the future," he says. "I think it's incumbent on me as the managing partner that the younger folks that we've brought on, that we made a promise to, that they're going to inherit a stronger law firm that they'll be able to pass on as well."