

Attorney's friendly nature helped propel his career success



By Brian Cox

Duncan Manley isn't interested in "networking" – he doesn't even like the word. It sounds too intentional and calculated for his tastes.

The soft-spoken Alabama attorney is far more interested in establishing authentic relationships than "connections." In short, he wants to make friends.

"I'm an outgoing person," he says. "I've always been an affable person and I enjoy talking to people. It's just my nature."

He jokes that his wife on occasion has become annoyed with him when they have gone out to dinner and he spent more time talking to the waitperson than to her.

"I just like talking to people, and I'm inquisitive, and I like finding out about people," he says.

Making friends is second nature to Manley and it took him many years before he recognized that the friendships he was forging often led to business for the firm. Gaining the business was a byproduct of his relationships, he insists – never the motive behind becoming friends.

In the days before television advertising, much of which Manley finds distasteful, he remembers once having a conversation with a more veteran lawyer, who told him the firm would draw business as a result of their good work. The firm's reputation would spread, the attorney explained, and clients would come to the firm because of the good work they were doing.

"And I believed that," says Manley. "But I later told him that things had changed. The legal profession is a business now and if we don't get business we'll go out of business. You can't just depend on your reputation anymore because other lawyers are talking to our clients and they want their business. We needed to not only protect our existing clients, but we needed to seek other clients to grow our practice."

Manley's marketing philosophy is simple and involves three steps.

"You have to meet people. You have to establish a relationship of trust with them. And then you have to, in some

way, let them know you are a capable lawyer."

Manley has been with the same Birmingham, Ala., law firm since graduating from Vanderbilt Law School in 1966. He began his career with Rives, Peterson, Pettus & Conway. Eventually, he became a partner and served on the firm's Executive Committee and was managing partner for many years. The firm was reinvented in 2001 and renamed Christian & Small LLP.

Manley grew up in Nashville, Tenn., with two older sisters. His father died when he was only 5 and he says the family "lived a very modest lifestyle." He worked a range of jobs in high school and college to earn money, including hawking newspapers on the street and in a hospital, sacking groceries, delivering flowers during holidays, and working at a lumber company.

He was the first in his family to get a college degree and do graduate work. He developed the desire to be a lawyer at an early age, though he can't remember a specific source of inspiration. When he told his mother he wanted to go to law school, she cried. She didn't hold a high opinion of lawyers at the time and had hoped her son would attend the seminary to become an Episcopalian minister.

"I've always been sort of a talker and, I guess, some people said you ought to be a lawyer," he says.

He attended college at University of the South in Sewanee, Tenn., where he earned a degree in political science in 1960. He then went to the Naval Officer Candidate School in Newport, R.I., where he gained a commission.

A natural storyteller, Manley recounts that only days before graduation from Officer Candidate School, he came down with appendicitis and required surgery to have his appendix removed. Following surgery, he was placed in a ward of 15 or so beds.

"I was lying in bed the next day," he says, "And a nurse comes up and says you need to get out of bed and stand at attention at the foot of the bed when the doctor comes through. I said, wait a minute, I just was operated on yesterday. She said you need to get up and stand at attention, which I did."

Because he had not yet officially graduated as an officer, he

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was the lowest rank in the Navy, and near the end of his stay at the hospital, he was given a bucket and mop to swab the bathroom floors.

"I was just one or two days removed from not having to do any of that and probably would have had a private hospital room instead of having to be in the ward," says Manley with a soft chuckle. "I think about that often. It makes you appreciate the timing of things a little more."

Manley was stationed on two ships on the West Coast until he was discharged in January 1964. It was another instance of timing – in this case a fortunate one.

"The Vietnam War was just cranking up," says Manley. "If my discharge date had been two or three months later, they probably wouldn't have let me out."

He and his young wife, Celeta, whom he had married in 1961, returned to Nashville for Manley to attend law school. He graduated the summer of 1966. His father-in-law was a lawyer in Birmingham and offered to help him find a position.

He remembers clearly his interview with Rives, Peterson, Pettus & Conway, a firm of eight lawyers that was founded in 1936.

"One of the younger partners came out to get me and took me to the senior partner's office," relates Manley. "All the partners were sitting in his office and there was an empty chair right in the middle where I was invited to sit. One of them asked me, 'Do you want to be a trial lawyer?' Well, I knew that this firm was a trial firm and I knew my answer had to be yes if I wanted an offer. I had a little bit of smarts and I said, 'Yes, I want to be a trial lawyer,' really not knowing so much about what it was."



Duncan Manley and his wife, Celeta, on a scenic cruise with a glacier as a backdrop.

At the time, Manley had never seen a live trial – he hadn't even been in a courtroom – but he was confident in his ability to connect with others, both judges and juries.

"I thought I could be a good trial lawyer because I felt like I could communicate well with people," he says.

He accepted a position with the firm for \$600 a month, which he says was a very good starting salary for a lawyer in Birmingham at the time.

The firm has grown since then into a multi-disciplinary regional law firm with a global perspective and more than 30 lawyers. While headquartered in Birmingham, their additional offices in other areas provide the firm a strategic geographic base from which to serve clients on a statewide basis and throughout the Southeast.

Around the time the firm changed its name to Christian & Small in 2001, it received an invitation to attend a meeting in Hilton Head, S.C., with a fairly new association of law firms called Primerus™. Its ambitious aim was to restore and enhance the public image of lawyers. Manley admits, he was skeptical.

"It's a grand idea to want to help lawyers improve their image in the eyes of the public, but how is this group going to be able to do that?" he wondered.

At that meeting, however, Manley ended up embracing Primerus's high-minded mission. Jack Buchanan was very persuasive in making the case. Although unrelated to the Primerus™ mission, he proposed the group consider inviting clients to attend educational gatherings sponsored by Primerus™ lawyers as a way of establishing relationships. The idea was welcomed and supported by Jack and other Primerus™ board members, and in the next year or so, the first Primerus™ Defense Institute Convocation was held at the Ocean Reef Club in Key Largo, Fla. Manley recalls that some 18 clients attended.

"It was wonderful," says Manley of that first Convocation. "It was an intimate group. Everybody enjoyed each other's company."

Manley established rules of conduct for the Convocation, the most important of which was that there was to be no solicitation of business.

"It'll turn the clients off if you do that," he told the lawyers. "Just make friends. Don't shove any brochures or business cards in their faces. What you're trying to do is establish a relationship with them and hopefully they'll think of you if they need a lawyer wherever you practice."

It was an approach that had served Manley well over his career and that is now a central tenet of Primerus™.

As chairman of the Primerus™ Defense Institute from 2004-07, Manley was instrumental in guiding its development and was ultimately named chair emeritus, a position he currently holds.

He says the relationships he has developed with Primerus™ attorneys all over the world and the deep friendships he has

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forged with Jack and Sheila Buchanan are the greatest benefits of his association with the society.

Over the course of his long career, Manley has witnessed many changes to the profession, of course. He notes that it was around 1970 that Birmingham saw its first million-dollar verdict. People were flabbergasted.

"Million-dollar verdicts are now commonplace. Fifty-million-dollar verdicts are not unusual," he says. "It's just become very dangerous to submit your case to a jury these days and as a consequence so many more cases are being settled and young lawyers are not getting any trial experience. It is a dilemma all litigation firms now face. Clients want experienced lawyers trying their cases."

Technology has transformed the practice, too. When Manley started out, typewriters and mimeograph machines were tools of the trade.

"I've often said if the changes that are made in the next 50 years are comparable to the changes that were made in the last 50 years, God only knows what it's going to be like," he says.

Manley and his wife, Celeta, who will be married 62 years in September, have three sons. Their oldest son, Duncan Jr., earned an MBA from Vanderbilt University and owns his own consulting company. Reid followed in his father's footsteps and is a partner at Burr & Forman, a large regional law firm headquartered in Birmingham. Their youngest son, Clay, lives in Houston where he is a portfolio manager with Invesco Mutual Fund Co.



On an annual fly-fishing trip out west, Duncan Manley strikes a pose with his sons, Duncan and Clay.

Manley regularly attends two Bible study classes a week and goes to church on Sunday, a fact that would likely please his mother. He reads a lot and enjoys traveling with his wife. In May, they're taking a cruise from Montreal up the St. Lawrence River.

He will turn 84 in September and is considering retiring at the end of the year. Even so, he can't imagine not coming into the office regularly to keep his hands and mind in the business.

"I don't think I could ever not be a lawyer," says Manley. "It's just in my blood, I guess."