

A long-ago role in sales offered life lessons for Connecticut lawyer

By Brian Cox

It would be a clear overstatement to claim Frank Szilagyi learned all he needed to know about being a successful trial attorney from his years as a wholesale beer salesman — but he learned more than you might initially think.

“Selling beer, it’s telling a story,” says the managing partner of Szilagyi & Daly in Hartford, Conn. “It’s connecting with your customer, getting an understanding of what they need or what they want, and then finding a way to show them why what you have satisfies that need or that desire.”

Litigation, he says, is not all that much different in that regard.

“A trial is telling a story within an established set of rules and trying to figure out what will resonate with a jury and put



Frank Szilagyi and his wife Meghan have been married 17 years.



your client in the best possible light to achieve the best possible outcome,” he says.

Szilagyi’s time as a sales representative for a family-owned Anheuser Busch distributor helped polish some of the interpersonal skills he now employs as a defense attorney. He sold beer for close to five years after college — including while he attended Western New England University School of Law at night. He recalls the job as a great gig that was fun and paid well for a fellow in his mid-20s.

In fact, he says with a wry smile, he had to take a pay cut when he accepted his first position with a small litigation firm after earning his J.D.

Working a full-time job during the day while attending law classes at night and studying on the weekends was admittedly a grind, but Szilagyi had plenty of experience with tall tasks from his years as a high school and college athlete.

Born and raised in Hartford, Szilagyi’s father was an attorney for Aetna (now United Health Care) and his mother worked for an insurance company. He and his younger brother, John, were day students at The Avon Old Farms School, a boarding school for boys founded in 1927. Its diverse student body included students from around the world.

A student-athlete, Szilagyi excelled at lacrosse as a midfielder and at swimming where he mainly competed in the 100-meter freestyle, 200-meter freestyle, and the 200-meter individual medley. The swim team his junior year went undefeated and won the school its first of many Independent School Swimming Association championships. The team was inducted into the school’s Athletic Hall of Fame in 2006.

“I learned lessons about the benefits of what hard work can do for you whether it was academically or athletically,” says Szilagyi. “To this day, I still have friends from high school that I’m in touch with and close with.”

Szilagyi went on to play Division 1 lacrosse at the University of Connecticut, where he studied political science and sports marketing. An ACL tear his senior year led to wearing a cast from

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toe to hip for six weeks and a long period of physical therapy.

After graduation, Szilagyi found job opportunities in sports marketing were few and took a position with a health and fitness club where he worked for almost three years before meeting a couple of club members who owned the local Anheuser Busch distributorship.

And so began Szilagyi's halcyon days of selling beer and honing his ability to connect with people and establish trust.

When he entered law school, Szilagyi says his focus was sharper and his engagement deeper than it had been in college. He remembers getting off work early on Fridays and heading over to the courthouse to spend the afternoon observing trials and taking note of how the lawyers practiced and the judges behaved.

His first job after earning his J.D. was with an insurance defense firm, which he was with for some 2-1/2 years before he ventured out with two other attorneys to start their own firm, Chadwick, Libbey & Szilagyi.

"I wanted the opportunity to control my own destiny," Szilagyi says, remembering speaking to a friend of his father who warned him the move was too risky. "But I was at the point in my life where I could take the chance."

The risk paid off and for the next seven years, Szilagyi threw every moment and every ounce of energy into building his practice, which included acting as outside general counsel for the Hartford Police Union. He represented the 500-member union's grievances before the state board of mediation and arbitration and negotiated its collective bargaining agreement with the city. The work provided Szilagyi opportunities to argue in court he might not otherwise have gotten as a young attorney in a larger firm.

More than 20 years later, Szilagyi has extensive experience defending claims in the area of professional liability, premises liability, liquor liability, contractor liability, product liability, and general tort liability claims, as well as the defense of automobile, trucking and under insured motorist claims. He has defended claims brought against public entities, including civil rights and constitutional claims brought against police officers and teachers.

"My practice really just evolved from the relationships and the people that I met over time," says Szilagyi.

In 2000, Szilagyi joined Silvester & Daly as a partner. The firm was founded in 1969 by George Silvester and Edward Daly, Jr. A few years later, the firm became Szilagyi & Daly with Szilagyi as managing partner.

He continues to enjoy taking on a problem, finding a solution, and taking care of clients, though sometimes a case can keep him up at night. He finds satisfaction in explaining the judicial process to worried clients, coming up with a plan, and getting a good result.

He and his wife, Meghan, have been married 17 years and he appreciates the support she and the family have provided

him. Meghan works as a national accounts manager for a pharmaceutical company. His daughter from a first marriage, Kate Nett, has two children — Logan, 11, and Savannah, 6 — and lives in Virginia. Meghan's son, Nolan, graduates in February with a degree in Economics from Middlebury College, where he plays football, and her daughter, Mackenzie, is a nurse who played Division 1 soccer at Quinnipiac University in Hamden, Conn.

Szilagyi's parents immigrated to Connecticut from Hungary in 1956. He has visited Hungary several times over the years and recalls childhood trips to Budapest with his family to visit relatives during the summer — frustratingly right in the middle of Little League season. He served as the president of the Hungarian Club of Hartford from 1992-96.

He has also served as chairman of the board of directors for the Connecticut Institute for the Blind (Oak Hill), one of the state's largest nonprofit agencies that helps people with disabilities experience rich, fulfilling lives. Currently, Szilagyi is the chairman of the board for The Open Hearth, which provides services to men transitioning from homelessness to work.

"I've always tried to do something to give back," he says.

The firm was invited to join Primerus in 2009, which provided Szilagyi a new avenue for networking with other lawyers. He



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remembers receiving a letter from Texas attorney Bob Brown, introducing him to Primerus and explaining the organization's aim and values. Brown told Szilagyi that Primerus' Convocation was the best opportunity he had each year to market his firm.

"It was at a point and time I was looking for another way to build our firm," says Szilagyi. "It truly has been the same experience here for us."

He has been deeply involved with Primerus ever since and served as chairman of the Primerus Defense Institute and as a former member of the Primerus board of directors. He also served as chair of the Ambassador's Committee, which focuses on helping new members assimilate into the organization. He encourages members to be active in Primerus as a way of forging relationships and realizing the full benefits the organization has to offer.

"It really was a catapult for us," says Szilagyi. "It was an opportunity for us to make many more connections that benefited our firm and the clients we served. Through Primerus, we have the reach of law firms that are significantly bigger than we are and our reach is far better than some of those firms because of how Primerus is now structured globally.

"It's an organization I've enjoyed being a part of," concludes Szilagyi. "It's been a tremendous opportunity for our firm. I've met a lot of great people over the years who have become my friends."



Frank and his wife Meghan with her daughter, Mackenzie, and son, Nolan, who plays football for Middlebury College.