

# Former journalist drawn to appeal of real estate work with Alaska law firm

By Brian Cox

Attorney Benjamin “Ben” Spiess is drawn to the challenge of hard work – in his practice and in his personal life.

It was the promise of hard work that attracted him to Landye Bennett Blumstein LLP in Anchorage, Alaska, six years ago after having lunch with a friend at the firm who described the place as “full of busy lawyers working hard every day.”

“I want to come work for you guys,” Spiess recalls saying.

It was also the allure of hard work and adventure that led Spiess to accept an offer two years ago to join a friend on a 47-foot cutter-rigged sailboat crossing the Arctic Northwest Passage, a sea route that connects the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans through the



**In 2022, Ben Spiess sailed 1,500 miles across the Northwest Passage with Dave Thoreson, a veteran of two Northwest Passage trips and thousands of miles of bluewater sailing. The pair were invited on the journey by Mark Synnott, skipper of the Polar Sun, who sailed from Maine to Alaska.**



Arctic Ocean and the Canadian Arctic Archipelago. His friend, Mark Synnott, was sailing from Portland, Maine, to Nome and needed to fill out his crew for the last leg of the voyage. Spiess met up with Synnott in Tuktoyaktuk, an Inuvialuit hamlet in the Northwest Territories, and journeyed west on the Polar Sun to Nome, crossing 1,500 miles of open ocean.

Spiess drew on his background in journalism to write an award-winning four-part account of the arduous trip for Alaska Sports Report titled “Arctic Passage: Sailing the Edge of Alaska.”

“At times, a sense of foreboding pervades September in the Arctic – the sky, sea, and land are all grey alike. It was late fall with the cold coming down and the pack ice behind,” Spiess wrote.

The journey represents everything that caused Spiess to first fall in love with Alaska when he originally visited years ago to climb Denali, the highest mountain in North America. Formerly known as Mt. McKinley, Mt. Denali sports a summit elevation of 20,310 feet above sea level.

“Alaska is this sort of wide-open place,” says Spiess. “It creates opportunity and is full of opportunity. You can build your own life.”

Growing up in Marblehead, Mass., a young Spiess envisioned becoming a farmer or journalist. His father, a Harvard Law grad, was general counsel for First National Bank of Boston. The family was active skiers and hikers, which seeded Spiess’s future passion for mountain running and cycling. He also spent his days on the water, sailing every type of small boat and lobster fishing in skiffs.

After graduating from Holderness School, a New Hampshire boarding school where Spiess skied and played soccer, he attended Middlebury College in Vermont where he ran varsity cross-country and studied history.

In 1997, Spiess answered the siren call beckoning him back to Alaska. He took a position with The Anchorage Daily News, and for the next seven years covered state politics and natural resources development, including oil drilling in the Alaska Arctic Refuge and offshore fishing in the Bering Sea. He reported on the gubernatorial race and Anchorage City Hall. His byline even ran on several stories in The New York Times.

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**Attorney Ben and his 7-year-old son, Alexander, who is into Lego building, swimming, and skiing.**

The work prepared him in many ways for his future legal career.

“Being a journalist forces you to communicate,” says Spiess. “Journalism gave me the courage to ask a lot of stupid questions, and it also gave me the tools to communicate clearly without using legalese.”

In 2003, ready for a change from journalism, Spiess returned to the East Coast to earn a law degree from Boston Law School. Following law school, he accepted a position with Bingham McCutchen in downtown Boston where he worked for four years, developing experience in corporate and real estate law.

Downtown Boston, however, wasn’t Anchorage.

Spiess headed back to Alaska, joining Stoel Rives, a corporate and litigation law firm with offices in seven states and Washington, D.C. He continued to gain experience in commercial real estate and corporate mergers and acquisitions.

“What lawyers do is a lot closer to carpentry than it is to rocket science,” says Spiess. “It’s like building a wall.”

As a partner in the Real Estate Practice Group at Landye Bennett Blumstein, Spiess represents clients across the Pacific Northwest in all aspects of real estate transactions, including business formation, deal structuring, real estate purchase and sales, development, leasing, financing, business formation and structuring, mergers, equity and asset transactions, corporate reorganizations, and corporate governance. He also practices in the areas of land use and zoning, Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), and public lands, and is active in Arctic policy and development.

“Alaska presents all sorts of novel and unique challenges to people who are looking to do anything on Alaskan land,” says Spiess. “Doing business in Alaska is much the same as in the Lower 48, but when it’s different, it’s completely different.”

It’s that same quality of difference and the opportunity for “novel and unique challenges” that Spiess discovered on his first visit to the state and that brought him back as a young lawyer looking to build a life.



**Ben and Alexander with Malamute puppies.**