

Pittsburgh native found just the right fit at Raleigh firm



By Brian Cox

In 2019, attorney Joe Davies found what he often describes as his “Goldilocks” firm: not too big and not too small. Smith Debnam Narron Drake Saintsing & Myers, LLP, in Raleigh, N.C. was “just right.”

“I have not once in the five-and-a-half years of being here gotten in the car in the morning and thought, ‘I don’t want to go to work today,’” says Davies, a member of the firm’s Construction Law Group. “Smith Debnam has the collegiality of a smaller firm with the logistical support of a big firm. I joke that I finally found this place and I’m not leaving until they drag me out.”

Davies took a “circuitous route” to find the firm where he feels he belongs.

Born in Pittsburgh and raised in Lancaster, Pa., Davies grew up in Amish country and “small town” America. He loved Pittsburgh

sports teams and played soccer from as far back as he can remember. His senior year in high school, he was on the track team for about six weeks before he broke his nose pole vaulting. His mother was an English instructor at two local colleges and his father is still a labor and employment lawyer.

As a kid, Davies would often tell people he wanted to be a lawyer like his dad, but it wasn’t until college that he realized being a lawyer might actually be a good idea.

At the University of Richmond in Virginia, Davies double majored in history and political science with a minor in speech communication.

“What else could I be qualified for except law school?” he jokes, adding that he envisioned perhaps being either a litigator or working on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C.

He tested the waters before deciding anything for certain. During one summer in college, he worked at his father’s law firm. He spent his other summers working in the state capitals of Harrisburg and Richmond.

“I always say that I was doing everything I could to prove to myself that I didn’t want to be a lawyer,” says Davies, “but I loved both working in my father’s law firm and working in the state legislatures.”

The decision seemed clear. He enrolled at Duke University School of Law in Durham, N.C.

“I always knew I wanted to be a litigator because one of the things I enjoyed about the idea behind law school was being able to craft an argument,” says Davies. “The desire to be a lawyer probably came from my dad, but what I really like about it probably came from my mom in terms of writing and knowing how to craft a persuasive argument.”

After earning his law degree, Davies headed to Washington, D.C., where he joined Dow Lohnes, a large law firm that specialized in communications law. In the three years he was at the firm, Davies honed his writing and research skills but never set foot in court.

“I don’t know if I learned much about being a full-blown trial lawyer there because that’s just not what first-, second-, or third-year associates do at those big firms,” says Davies.



Davies with his wife, Elizabeth, and their two children, Page and Alex. Page is a freshman in high school and Alex is 10.

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The Davies family enjoys attending Carolina Hurricanes hockey games together.

Around the same time, Davies met his future wife, Elizabeth, who was living in the same apartment building as friends of his from law school. When Elizabeth was ready a few years later to return to her home state of North Carolina, Davies chose to go with her and accepted a position with a commercial litigation boutique firm in Charlotte where he was introduced to construction law.

The change in pace and responsibility was dramatic. Within his first week at the new firm, Davies found himself in court. For a full month, he couldn't bring himself to leave the office before 7 p.m., even though everyone else had usually cleared out. He went from being one of a half-dozen attorneys on a case where a motion he drafted was reviewed and revised by six or more hands, to often being the sole attorney on a case who drafted a motion and then argued it in court.

"I learned the difference between what I had been doing at the firm in D.C. and what my wife called 'being a real lawyer,'" says Davies.

For the next five years, Davies developed his practice, focusing on construction law, which he appreciated for its complexity and variety.

"The cases are always different and different wrinkles come up," he says. "I love learning new things."

He and Elizabeth married in 2008 and had their first child two years later. In 2012, as they considered having a second child, they reached the decision to move to Raleigh to be closer to family, and Davies joined Vann Attorneys, a business law firm in Raleigh that was similar in size and focus to the Charlotte firm he was coming from.

He continued to develop his practice in construction law, landlord-tenant disputes, business and shareholder disputes, and employment law, but in time he recognized that he missed the wider resources that had been at his disposal in the large D.C. firm. He felt he wanted something different.

His wife one day asked him, "What do you really want? If you could just decide where you wanted to be, where would it be?"

As he was knocking her question around in his mind, he received a call from a recruiter about an opportunity at Smith Debnam Narron Drake Saintsing & Myers, LLP, a firm founded in 1972 that represents a wide range of both national and local area businesses.

"Sometimes the best things come along when you're not looking," says Davies, who told the recruiter he was open to exploring the option.

After accepting an offer, Davies says he knew quickly he had "somehow" finally found where he wanted to be. He appreciated the firm's philosophy that no one lawyer's style is better than another and that each lawyer should find the style that is right for them.

"There was no pressure to fit a particular mold," says Davies. Davies now represents construction companies and



Davies and Elizabeth met when he was at a firm in Washington, D.C. and married in 2008. Page was born in 2010, before they moved to North Carolina, where they had their son, Alex.

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Davies and his family love to travel; here they are enjoying a boat ride on a recent trip to Italy.

small business owners in lease negotiations and complex litigation matters. His clients include general contractors and subcontractors, as well as property managers, landlords, commercial tenants, equipment rental companies, and building material suppliers. His litigation experience spans all types and sizes – from summary ejectments in small claims court, to collection actions and construction disputes in district and superior court, to appeals before the state Court of Appeals and Supreme Court, to a five-year federal class/collective action employee wage dispute.

One of his “claims to fame” in the firm is that he is licensed to practice in Pennsylvania, Washington, D.C., Virginia, and North Carolina.

“The joke is that I’m trying to dominate the Eastern seaboard,” he says, “but I think I’m good with four jurisdictions.”

Davies enjoys having a hand in mentoring the firm’s summer associates and strives to be open and instructive with them, traits he may have developed from his mother, though he says he doesn’t have a teacher’s level of patience.

“I like to think that I am somebody who is good at constructive criticism,” he says. “My approach is if you’re learning, there’s no such thing as a dumb question. I know mistakes are part of the learning process, and I want people to be comfortable enough with me that they can explain the thought process as to how they got somewhere and we can have a conversation about where things went sideways.”

On the wall in his office hangs a framed painting of the Santorini caldera, formed by an ancient volcanic eruption in the Aegean Sea off the coast of Santorini Island in Greece. Davies bought the painting in 2003 when he traveled to Greece with two friends after taking the bar exam. They visited Santorini and watched the sunset over the ancient crater, and Davies remembers one of his friends saying, “The world would be a lot better if everybody just stopped and watched this.”

All these years later, as Davies considers the painting his wife had framed for him, the artwork helps him keep things in perspective and reminds him that “at the end of the day, we’re all people together.”

He and Elizabeth, a pharmaceutical executive, have two children. Their daughter, Page, is a freshman in high school, and their son, Alex, is 10 and has just started playing ice hockey. The one thing both his kids will happily do without complaints, says Davies, is go to Carolina Hurricanes hockey games. The family also enjoys traveling and in recent years have gone to Grand Cayman, Italy, and Hawaii.

“We’ve been very lucky to go to some really awesome places,” he says.

A picture that Davies keeps on his desk reminds him of another special moment. It’s a photograph of him with his father and brother in Detroit in 2006 when his beloved Pittsburgh Steelers defeated the Seattle Seahawks 21-10 in Super Bowl XL. In the picture, he is wearing a Steelers jersey with the number of his favorite player, running back Jerome Bettis, who announced his retirement on the field after the game.

“That is one of my best memories,” he says. “We were all so happy to see our team win, but it made it even better that we were able to be there together.”

While his heart may still be with the Pittsburgh teams of his childhood, Davies says he is grateful to practice law in Raleigh with the firm he feels is an ideal fit.

“I don’t know if it took this place 15 years to find me or it took 15 years for me to find it,” says Davies, “but however it worked out, I’m glad it did.”