

‘Collaborative Legal Solutions’ at heart of Florida attorney’s mission at law firm

By Brian Cox

When attorney Stephen Padula ventured out on his own as a scrappy young attorney, he worked that first year out of an office located inside a plumbing company. He had one dedicated paralegal and brought on his mother to be bookkeeper. He occasionally bartered legal fees for rent and stretched himself thin to meet payroll and other bills.

Twenty years later, Padula has the same loyal paralegal but the offices of Padula Bennardo Levine, LLP in Boca Raton, Fla.,



Stephen and his wife, Esther, on a recent trip to Zurich, Switzerland. The couple celebrated their wedding at Lake Como in Italy.



feature glass walls, chrome fixtures, marble countertops, and vibrant framed artwork. Instead of an industrial complex, the firm’s building is a Mediterranean-style villa with terracotta tiles and a stucco façade with palm trees out front.

“We have a really beautiful office space,” says Padula with pride. “I don’t think I’ll ever leave until I retire.”

The offices reflect the firm’s standing and reputation among the South Florida business community where Padula and his partners, Cris Bennardo and Dan Levine, started the firm back in 2016 with the tagline “Collaborative Legal Solutions for Today’s Business Needs.”

“Our goal was to try to keep everything under one roof whether a client was a startup or a small to medium size company,” says Padula. “We can handle anything.”

A significant factor in meeting that goal and a second point of pride for Padula is that all three partners are Florida Bar Board Certified Specialists. Padula is certified in both business litigation and civil trial, while Bennardo is certified in real estate and Levine in labor and employment law.

Padula says the certifications represent the attorneys’ passion for their practice areas. Padula’s practice encompasses a wide range of cases involving construction litigation, real estate litigation, and franchise litigation.

“I always say there are litigators and there are trial lawyers,” he says. “We’re more trial lawyers than litigators. We usually get retained because the client feels they’re going to go to trial.”

Padula’s journey to his law office villa began far from South Florida. Born in Chicago, he grew up in the northwest suburb of Arlington Heights, where his father was a respected banker at Mount Prospect State Bank. When his father was diagnosed with brain cancer in the mid-1980s, the family relocated to Boca Raton – fulfilling his parents’ long-time dream of retiring to Florida. His father passed away at the age of 51, and Stephen, then 16, finished high school at Boca Raton High.

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Stephen and his sons, William (left) and Anthony. Anthony works at Padula Bennardo Levine as office manager and bookkeeper, a role he took over when his grandmother retired.

After high school, Padula remained uncertain about his future. He spent some time working as a certified personal trainer. The experience was formative. He loved the gym, loved the routine, and found satisfaction in the discipline of training every day. That sense of structure would become a throughline in his life and career.

When he was ready for college, he spent a couple of years at Loyola University in Chicago before finishing his degree at Lynn University in Boca Raton. Still, a career path had yet to crystallize for Padula.

The turning point came during a family visit to Chicago. His uncle, a seasoned criminal defense attorney with his own practice in Northwest Indiana, floated an idea: If Padula went to law school, his uncle would train and prepare him to eventually take over the practice.

"For whatever reason, that sounded good to me," Padula recalls. "So that's what I did. From that moment on, it was full steam ahead."

That conversation provided the sense of purpose Padula had been missing. He applied to the University of Miami School of Law, confident he had finally found the track that fit, and he never looked back.

In law school, Padula found himself invigorated by the challenge. Being a little older helped, he says. He had gained maturity and focus during his years of searching. Law school was demanding, but Padula was ready for it. He worked hard, formed

close friendships, and discovered his true passion in litigation. At first, he imagined himself pursuing criminal defense like his uncle, but his interests shifted. The late 1990s were a heady time for securities work, with IPOs and corporate deals in the headlines, and Padula considered pursuing securities regulation. But in the end, it was litigation that sparked his interest and satisfied his competitive drive.

During law school, he interned with the U.S. Attorney's Office in Miami, working in the narcotics division. The experience was unforgettable.

"All the cool big drug deals that you hear about in like 'Scarface' and 'Miami Vice,' I got to see it in real life," he recalls.

But what appealed most was the courtroom side of the work. He enjoyed the arguing, the ever-changing fact patterns, and the chance to dive into different industries and disputes.

"If it's a new industry, I get very excited about learning it and then applying my litigation or advocacy skills toward it," he says.

Padula's first position out of law school was with a solo practitioner in Boca Raton. The attorney was a jack-of-all-trades, with a particular interest in personal injury. The practice exposed Padula to a wide range of matters, and Padula gravitated toward business litigation. After two years, he moved on to a larger firm in downtown Fort Lauderdale that specialized in commercial litigation. There he trained under a mentor he likens to a drill sergeant – a lawyer who demanded discipline and precision. It



Stephen enjoys spending time with his sons, William and Anthony. Stephen has sat on the board of directors of Connections Education Center of the Palm Beaches since its beginning, serving as the school's first president.

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Stephen and his wife, Esther, who is a financial strategy consultant.

was, he says, an invaluable boot camp that reinforced the habits of preparation and focus that have carried through his career.

After several years at the larger firm, Padula realized that the path to equity partnership was narrow, and he wanted to build something of his own. In 2005, he took the leap. He left with his longtime assistant – who had faith in him and was willing to take the risk – and hung out his own shingle.

Those early years were lean, but they were also formative. Padula built his practice client by client, case by case. He worked relentlessly, and when clients couldn't pay, he often stuck with them anyway, believing in their businesses and their word.

"There were a couple businesses that died out, and I lost the money," he says, "but there were a lot that rebounded and did what they said they would. Clients appreciated that and referred me to other potential clients."

Over time, he moved into better office spaces – a character-rich building on Palmetto Park Boulevard, a few other stops – and eventually, the villa that now houses Padula Bennardo Levine. Along the way, he attracted and retained a loyal team. His paralegal has been with him more than 20 years. His two associate attorneys have each been with him more than 15 years.

"I never put myself higher than them," Padula says. "I consider us a team, and I'm very pleased they stuck with me."

The firm he leads today is the product of not just hard work but careful planning. When he connected with Cris Bennardo and Dan Levine in 2016, all three were established in Boca Raton, each with board certifications in their areas of practice. They were about the same age, had similar values, and saw an opportunity to build something greater together. But before they formally joined forces, Padula insisted they all meet together with his business coach. The three spent an intense weekend in Naples testing their compatibility and working through potential challenges. The investment of time and honesty paid off.

"It solidified our belief that we were a good group together," Padula says.

They came away with a mission statement, a clear vision, and a strong bond.

Today, the firm's culture reflects those roots. They host holiday parties and happy hours, make a point to ensure collegiality, and place value on teamwork and respect. Padula saw too many lawyers earlier in his career who disliked their jobs or their colleagues. He was determined to create a different environment.

"I wanted a place where everybody could get along," he says.

Padula's certifications in civil trial and business litigation, earned in 2014 and 2011 respectively, are a particular source of pride. He is active with the Florida Bar, contributing to committees that draft business jury instructions and writing and grading certification exams for other lawyers seeking to join the ranks of specialists.

"I enjoy being a mentor," he says. "I like to groom up-and-coming attorneys to take it to the next level."

Outside the office, Padula has a wide range of interests. He is a devoted mountain biker and skier, still loves the gym, and is, by his own admission, a metalhead. He schedules his days carefully, breaking for lunch at noon, making it home for dinner with the family at 6:30, and returning to the office if needed. His discipline is both personal and professional.

"Once I find something I really like, I'm passionate about it and I'm very disciplined," he says.

Family remains central to his life. He has two sons, Anthony and William, and he recently remarried, celebrating the wedding with his wife, Esther, at Lake Como in Italy. His son, Anthony, now works with him at the firm, stepping into the role once held by Padula's mother as bookkeeper and office manager.

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"It's nice seeing my son every day, and we go to the gym three times a week," Padula says.

He is also involved in the Boca Raton community, serving on the board of directors of Connections Education Center of the Palm Beaches, a school for children with special needs, where he was the first board president

Padula attributes his success to his focus on his client's needs. What matters most is showing up for his clients. He makes it a point to call them back, listen to their concerns, and treat them as people under stress who need not just a lawyer but a counselor and a friend. He doesn't sugarcoat things. He tells clients "the good, the bad, and the ugly."

Looking back, from the "plumbing" office to the villa office on Boca Raton Boulevard, from the uncertainty of his youth to the discipline and passion of his career, Padula sees a consistent thread: focus on the client, on the work, and on building trust.

"I have very good client satisfaction," he says. "I get a lot of feedback from clients saying you're my favorite lawyer because I feel like you're also my friend."