

A 'glue guy'

Connecticut attorney helps clients reach the next level

By Brian Cox

Tom Walsh has spent much of his career helping clients build businesses. The people he represents are often entrepreneurs who have taken a risk on a vision, a product, a company, or a piece of property and are trying to turn it into something that will endure.

"I have a lot of respect for business owners who take that leap because there are so many things working against you," says Walsh, a principal of Brody Wilkinson PC in Southport, Connecticut. "And it takes a lot. It takes a certain amount of confidence, and it certainly takes a lot of hard work."

The roots of Walsh's respect for self-starters may have something to do with where his own family story began.

His paternal grandfather was the second-oldest son in a farming family in Ireland. The oldest son would inherit the family farm, leaving Walsh's grandfather to find his own way. So, he did.



Among Tom Walsh's travel experiences with his family is a bike tour in Vietnam.



"He made the bold move to the United States where he found his own success," Walsh says.

Walsh's grandfather came to America in the early 20th century on a passenger ship that left Ireland immediately before the ill-fated Titanic. He settled in New Jersey and found work in a refrigeration plant, eventually becoming the plant manager. He and his wife raised four children, and the opportunities he created helped Walsh's father earn a college scholarship.

His father took that opportunity and built on it, earning a college degree and an MBA before embarking on his own career as a corporate executive.

Walsh grew up with an appreciation for what those accomplishments represented. His grandfather had left Ireland with little more than the willingness to make his own way. His father had taken the opportunities his father created and built a career of his own. Walsh felt a responsibility to continue the progression.

"I took a lot of personal and family pride out of these accomplishments and wanted to build on it," he says.

Walsh believes that his commitment to carry on his family legacy has fed a desire to excel at helping his clients and to always strive to be a better lawyer.

Born in New Jersey, his family moved to Connecticut when he was around 9, after his father took a job in Stamford, an hour northeast of New York City. Walsh grew up in a small-town environment, played plenty of baseball, tennis, and basketball, and spent his high school years writing for an award-winning student newspaper.

When he arrived at the University of Connecticut, he thought he might become a journalist – he certainly didn't envision himself as a business lawyer. He enjoyed the process of learning about an issue and figuring out how to explain it to someone else.

"You get to learn about different subjects and maybe you're even doing some justice along the way," he says.

Writing for the university's daily student newspaper gave him a closer look at the profession, however. He watched editors work late into the night, rewriting stories and racing to meet deadlines. Journalism lost its allure, and a career in law eventually began to look like a better fit.

A 'glue guy': Connecticut attorney helps clients reach the next level



Tom accepts the Corporate Citizen of the Year Award from Fairfield Theatre Company on behalf of Brody Wilkinson in 2014. The firm is a long-time supporter of the theatre company.

A political science class had introduced him to the Constitution and the legal system, and something clicked. By his sophomore year, he had decided to concentrate on getting the grades necessary for law school.

At UConn School of Law, corporate law came more naturally to him than some of the other subjects. A corporate law class taught by Dean Philip Blumberg particularly caught his attention. Walsh also worked part-time in the compliance department of Advest, a small Hartford investment banking firm, where he saw the role of in-house counsel firsthand.

When he graduated in 1986, Walsh expected he might become a litigator. Instead, his first assignment at Marsh, Day & Calhoun put him alongside one of the firm's senior partners, who had lost an associate and needed help with corporate work.

The assignment turned into a career.

Walsh spent about 13 years at the Bridgeport firm, becoming a partner in a little over six years. His father was an important influence on his career, encouraging him to build a practice in Connecticut rather than follow the conventional path toward New York City.

Walsh realized early on that he needed to build relationships to develop his own book of business. He joined the Connecticut Bar Association's Young Lawyers Group, became involved

with the Chamber of Commerce, and began making a point of meeting bankers and other professionals who worked with business owners.

He understood that building a successful law practice requires a willingness to keep building your skills. His involvement in the ABA Business Law Section over the past two decades has given him opportunities to learn from lawyers around the country. He has served as budget officer and chaired the Middle Market and Small Business Committee.

He has found that the relationships and exposure have made him a better lawyer.

Eventually, several of his colleagues decided to leave Marsh, Day & Calhoun and join a new firm, Brody Wilkinson. Walsh went with them, along with some lawyers who had left the old firm years earlier.

"It was a little bit of a full circle moment," he says. "I have been fortunate to have some great colleagues, and we have worked together to build a locally prominent law firm."

That first year at Brody Wilkinson was, by his account, the busiest year of his career. He had to learn new systems, establish himself with people who did not know him, and make sure his clients were comfortable with the transition.

He discovered that he was at home with the business-development side of law, partly because he didn't think of it as selling or marketing.

"I took the view that our job was to help people and to find solutions to their legal problems," he says. "I didn't feel like I was selling anything in particular. I was trying to figure out how I could help people who needed help."

Walsh characterizes his practice in a single sentence: "I help clients grow their businesses and stay out of legal trouble."



Tom Walsh with his Irish cousins at the family home in Granard, County Longford, Ireland.

A 'glue guy': Connecticut attorney helps clients reach the next level

His clients are typically privately held companies and the entrepreneurs behind them. They may need help forming a company, negotiating a major contract, arranging financing, acquiring or selling real estate, developing a brand, or navigating a business dispute.

Walsh sees his role as “helping the clients avoid that critical mistake that can ruin their business or can be a huge distraction that sidetracks them.”

Over the course of his career, Walsh has developed a reputation for being calm under pressure and a team player.

“I’m somebody who helps bring people together and who helps the team perform well,” he explains. “I try to make sure people are being respected for what they do, and I’m known for performing well in stressful situations.”

The description applies as readily to the way Walsh works with colleagues as it does to his work with clients. Brody Wilkinson has about 25 attorneys, and Walsh describes the firm’s lawyers as hardworking and collaborative. They work together regularly, sharing advice and bringing one another into matters when a client’s needs extend beyond a particular lawyer’s practice.

“As hard as it is to get a group of lawyers to practice as a team, we do pretty well with it,” he jokes.

A collaborative instinct remains part of the culture Walsh describes at Brody Wilkinson, where the firm represents entrepreneurs, high-net-worth individuals and families in business, estate planning, and related matters.



Tom in his office at Brody Wilkinson in Southport, Connecticut.

The firm’s location in Fairfield County offers another advantage. Clients can receive sophisticated legal services without the cost structure of a New York City firm, while the firm’s Primerus affiliation gives Walsh access to lawyers around the country when his clients’ needs extend beyond Connecticut.

He can pick up the phone and find a lawyer in almost any part of the U.S. and in many foreign countries. Sometimes those relationships solve ordinary business legal problems. Sometimes they solve problems that are anything but ordinary.

One client once called early in the morning because someone traveling with him had been pulled over in Texas and jailed. Walsh called a lawyer he knew through Primerus.

“I was able to look like a hero by calling a lawyer down in Texas I knew, and the client was out of jail by 10 a.m.,” he says.

Another client had an employee delivering wine in a truck in a warm climate. After the driver was jailed following a traffic stop, the client worried about what would happen to the wine sitting in the truck. Walsh found a lawyer in the state who helped get the vehicle released within hours.

Those are the kinds of unexpected moments that Walsh believes can cement a client relationship. Time and again he is reminded of a lesson he learned from Bruce Dillingham, a corporate lawyer Walsh worked with at Marsh, Day & Calhoun.

Dillingham taught Walsh that clients were looking for someone who could help them solve problems rather than create them.



Tom and his wife, Cathy, have been married for 38 years.

A 'glue guy': Connecticut attorney helps clients reach the next level

"That was great advice," Walsh says. "He showed me the way to serve clients that has allowed me to make a living all these years."

Walsh now tries to pass that lesson along to younger lawyers. His approach to mentoring is deliberately broad. He pays attention not only to how lawyers are performing professionally, but to how they are doing as people.

"I try to be holistic about it," he says.

Walsh and his wife, Cathy, have been married 38 years and have two children, both of whom live in Manhattan. Their son, Chris, works at an asset management firm buying high yield bonds, and their daughter, Claire, does financial communications consulting.

"I guess a lot of finance was being talked about at our house when they were growing up," says Walsh with a laugh, "since that seems to have rubbed off on everybody."



Tom and Cathy with their two children, Chris and Claire, both of whom work in the finance industry.