

Fall 2026

Paradigm™

**Attorneys
know the
magnetic pull
of the equine
community**

President's Podium:

**Forward!
A vision for
Primerus
2027-2031**

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The World's Finest Law Firms™

The Primerus Paradigm™

Fall 2026



About Our Cover

Far beyond the courtroom, a number of Primerus attorneys are champions of the equine world, exploring the powerful intersection of their love for the law and their passion for riding, showing, breeding, and owning horses.



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Every lawyer in Primerus™ shares a commitment to a set of common values known as the Six Pillars:

- Integrity
- Excellent Work Product
- Reasonable Fees
- Continuing Legal Education
- Civility
- Community Service

For a full description of these values, please visit primerus.com

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Attorneys know the magnetic pull of the equine community

“No hour of life is wasted that is spent in the saddle.”

So wrote Winston Churchill in his 1930 autobiography, where he reflected on his lifelong passion for equestrian pursuits, contrasting the healthy, character-building rewards of riding horses with the dangers of gambling on them.

Churchill, who earned eternal fame for his leadership role during World War II,

was mesmerized by all aspects of the equestrian world – riding, showing, racing, and breeding – recognizing full well that “for one to fly, one needs only to take the reins,” a comment made by horse fancier Melissa James.

This deep-rooted passion is shared by three Primerus attorneys – Nora Ciano of Virginia, Kathryn Baldwin of California, and Julio Quijano of Panama – each of whom has experienced the profound, wordless connection forged with a horse,

earning the trust of a majestic, powerful animal who has drawn them in to a tight-knit, global equine family.

Here, in the following pages, are their respective stories, which carry an underlying theme that Churchill best expressed: “The history of mankind is carried on the back of a horse.” **P**

Attorney wears a number of hats in the equine world

By Tom Kirvan

A native of Sacramento, Kathryn Baldwin holds degrees from California State University and Pacific McGeorge School of Law, where she was a member of the nationally ranked Mock Trial Competition Team.



Kathryn E. Baldwin
Partner
Wilke Fleury LLP

In many respects, her work and her life are interchangeable parts for Sacramento attorney Kathryn Baldwin, a partner at Wilke Fleury LLP in California's capital city.

For years, Baldwin has struck a nifty balance between the intellectual demands of her law practice and that of an award-winning equestrienne who regularly competes in regional and national shows while also maintaining a breeding operation for her prized stallion, Psax, an 18-year-old Arabian horse that sires two to three foals a year.

Now, for good measure, Baldwin has added another feather to her equine cap, serving as a licensed judge at horse show competitions.

The licensing process for show judges, which can take up to three years to complete, involves "rigorous testing" procedures, according to Baldwin, who obtained her certification nearly two years ago.

"I don't want to put it on a par with the bar exam, but in some ways, it was harder than the bar exam," said Baldwin, who earned her juris doctor from Pacific McGeorge School of Law in 2016. "Going in, I had heard that it was difficult. There are people in the industry that I know and respect that have had to go back more than once to pass the exam, which is an indication of how challenging it is."

In her relatively new role, Baldwin has judged a pair of local shows and this fall will be in line to judge two rated shows in Texas and California, which feature a robust competitive circuit with thousands of dollars at stake in prize money for the top riders.

"They rank the licenses, so when you start you have a small license, and then you need a large license to judge the really

big shows," Baldwin indicated. "Probably after five or six years of judging, I will have gained enough experience to test for the large license, which will open up more judging opportunities for me."

Coincidentally, judging and showing have given Baldwin the opportunity to occasionally cross paths with horses that Psax has sired.

"Every once in a while, I bump into a horse and say, 'I think that's Psax's,'" Baldwin said. "Not too long ago I was at a show and was watching this horse go around and I said to myself, 'This horse looks so familiar.' And then when he went around again, I said, 'Oh, that's Psax's son for sure.'"

"In fact, when I sent our baby horse, Milo, down to a training barn in San Marcos, California, he ended up next to one of his half-brothers," Baldwin related. "It's been so great to see these horses from Psax grow and develop. Some of them are seriously decorated and have won all of the awards that there are."

As a horse breeder, Baldwin said she derives special satisfaction from the joy that her stallion's offspring have brought to others in the equine community.

"He's been a fantastic horse," Baldwin said of Psax, whom she lovingly calls a "2008 model with low miles." The stallion boasts an impressive track record of showing success, and no history of warranty claims or recalls.

"He's still going strong despite his age," Baldwin said of the stallion. "He doesn't work too hard, so I think he's keeping himself young that way. He's had some incredible foals who have gone on to win national championships."

"He's just not a typical stallion," Baldwin added. "He's very trustworthy and very

mellow. I have a colleague here at the office who brought his kids out to see the horses, and Psax was the one I brought out so they could brush him and get to know him, and he was happy to just stand there and oblige.”

The outing for her friend’s children undoubtedly rekindled memories for Baldwin of her childhood when she first began taking riding lessons. Her early interest in horses took on an even greater

fascination when her parents bought her a horse named Vincent, delivered on Christmas Day, with whom she competed regionally beginning at age 11 in championships as far away as Reno, Nev.

Three years later, with a new horse named WCA Chantar, Baldwin finished among the top 10 junior riders in the country at the national competition in Albuquerque, N.M. in four different divisions, including equitation, hunter

pleasure, and western pleasure, a feat no horse-and-rider combination has likely managed at the same show since. The following year, at the age of 17, she won it all, becoming the U.S. Reserve Champion from a class of 98 riders. A few months later, Baldwin captured a second national title at the Canadian Nationals in Regina, Saskatchewan.



Kathryne and Psaxamillion (“Milo”), Psax’s son, are pictured after competing in the geldings’ halter division at the Region I Arabian Championships in Del Mar, Calif. in 2024.

“It was really exciting stuff,” Baldwin declared, noting that “2003 was a big year for me.”

Two decades later, in 2023, Baldwin’s outlook took on an even rosier glow. That year, and in 2024 as well, Baldwin and her horse had the honor of appearing in the Rose Parade, the famed New Year’s Day celebration through the streets of Pasadena, Calif., home of the annual Rose Bowl Game.

The parade route covers 5.5 miles and travels at a leisurely pace of 2.5 miles per hour, according to organizers. The procession, which is televised globally and draws an estimated 750,000 spectators, features intricately designed floral floats, marching bands, and a number of equestrian performances.

“It was exciting and it was an adventure,” Baldwin said of the Rose Parade experience. “You have to park the horse trailer on the freeway the night before, so the horses spend the night in the trailer, while everyone riding in the parade sleeps in their trucks. And then at 6:30 in the morning, you walk your horse up a freeway on-ramp over to the point where you feed into the parade.

“It’s a weird environment for the horses – with the marching bands, the floats, and then a flyover by a stealth bomber,” Baldwin noted. “All of the horse people were counting down the minutes until the flyover, and then here comes this gigantic plane and you could just feel its power in your chest. The horses, as it turned out, were just fine. I think they were more distracted by the bands and other noises in the distance.”

Maintaining focus, of course, is something that Baldwin does exceedingly well in all aspects of her life, particularly in her law practice where she handles business, insurance, landlord-tenant, real estate litigation, and medical malpractice



Kathryne and Psax, competing in the western pleasure division at the Region I Arabian Championships in Del Mar, Calif., in 2024.

matters. She also continues to assist fellow equine enthusiasts, constantly counseling on the benefits of putting all agreements in writing in an industry where the power of a handshake still reigns supreme.

While in law school, Baldwin spent a summer clerking at Wilke Fleury, one of Sacramento’s oldest and largest law firms that marked its centennial in 2022. She accepted an offer to join the firm

upon graduation and was named a partner in 2023.

“The firm has a fantastic group of very bright, intelligent lawyers, and over the past couple of years I’m spending more time overseeing our associates and in the business development realm,” said Baldwin, who has been active in the Young Lawyers Section of Primerus. “No two days are alike, and that keeps my job interesting, challenging, and rewarding.” 

Managing partner helps spearhead unprecedented growth of Panamanian law firm

By Tom Kirvan

Julio Quijano Berbey has presided over the growth of the Panamanian law firm that bears his family name.



Julio A. Quijano Berbey
Senior & Founding Partner
Quijano & Associates

At times he says he is a slave to his work as the senior managing partner of Quijano & Associates, a Panama City law firm that his late father co-founded in 1959 in the Republic of Panama, the Central American country that bridges the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

Despite the demands of his job, attorney Julio Quijano Berbey said he was somewhat destined to follow in his father's legal footsteps.

"I grew up with a lawyer-father, a man who was an intellectual and a legal scholar," Quijano said of his father, also named Julio. "When I was about 8 or 9 years old and a teacher asked me, 'What do you want to do with your life?' I couldn't think of anything else to say, so I basically brainwashed myself into eventually becoming an attorney."

And he has been a successful one at that, serving as the head of an international law firm that has offices in 11 countries and has grown to include nearly 250 employees on its monthly payroll. The success comes at a price, he acknowledged.

"I work seven days a week," Quijano said bluntly. "If God would've made an eighth day, I would have been recruited to work on that one, too."

The firm traces its roots, not surprisingly, to providing a worldwide clientele with advice and assistance in maritime and offshore matters. Only two years after its founding, it became the first Panamanian law firm to establish a presence in Europe in the premier global hub for international banking – thereby marking an early milestone that underscored its commitment to international service and cross border capability.

"I would say from a business point of view, these are historic times that we are living

Panama's population of 4.6 million people is mostly concentrated around the Panama City and Colon corridor.

in now," said Quijano. "The organization is thriving and it continues to grow at a very healthy pace. And, besides the law firm, we now have fiduciary or trust companies in a plurality of jurisdictions, along with accounting firms and real estate firms. So, from a business point of view, we are as strong and healthy as we've ever been."

Quijano said he is one of nine partners in the firm that ranks as one of the most prominent in Panama, a country with a population of 4.6 million people, mostly concentrated around the Panama City and Colon corridor.

"We have maintained a strong international dimension" Quijano said. "Our global footprint allows us to support clients wherever their business takes them. As a result, I travel a great deal, participating in conferences and seminars, most of the time as a speaker or presenter."

Quijano grew accustomed to a heavy diet of travel at an early age after attending boarding school and then college and law school in the U.S.

"I went to one of the blueblood Northeast boarding schools that have been around forever, even before the U.S. became a country," said Quijano of the start of his educational journey abroad. "After graduating from high school, I went to Colgate University in upstate New York. After Colgate, I headed for Tulane Law School in New Orleans, where I obtained my law degree in 1989."

He was encouraged to study abroad by his father "but not for the reasons you may imagine," said Quijano.

"He did it because he thought that, for me, learning English was going to be an instrumental tool in making sure that I could become prominent within the group of lawyers that I was going to be competing with," Quijano related. "That

was good advice by him. As a matter of fact, although I did not speak English until I was about 15, my lexicon or vocabulary, in all due honesty, is perhaps above average in the U.S. now."

His father, who worked well into his late 70s before passing away, founded the firm with two other partners. Collectively, they agreed to use just the Quijano surname when choosing a moniker for the firm, figuring it would be more recognizable for identity and branding purposes. Similar to his son, the patriarch of the family also studied abroad.

"He went to school in Argentina, Colombia, and the U.S.," Quijano said of his father. "Panama is a very small country, even by today's standards, so Panamanians tend to look outward instead of inward, which gives us an edge because we tend to understand the world better than people in other latitudes."

Quijano's mother, Isolda, was a teacher who used her tutorial skills to make sure that her son and his sister, Daphne, were outstanding students.

"She is a devout professor-teacher who really focused on her favorite two students," Quijano said with a wink.

As head of the law firm that bears his family name, Quijano focuses his practice on "mostly corporate and wealth protection matters." He derives joy in mentoring younger members of the firm and in seeing it grow and prosper.

"What really keeps me going is the acquisition of new business or obtaining new clients," he said. "That is something that is still very fulfilling. It makes me feel good that we have more and more clients on a global basis every year. And, by virtue of that, you end up meeting a lot of interesting and nice people."

Such as from the world of Primerus, of which Quijano & Associates has been a longtime member, according to South Carolina attorney Christian Stegmaier, president and CEO-designate of Primerus.

In the July 7 President's Desk column appearing in the Primerus Weekly newsletter, Stegmaier lauded Quijano for hosting the June LATAM Regional Meeting.

"In Panama City, Julio Quijano of Quijano & Associates opened his firm's doors and was a truly gracious host of our June regional meeting," wrote Stegmaier in his column highlighting the good works that are a hallmark of Primerus lawyers. "He and his staff made it first-rate, and he made every colleague who traveled there feel welcome. Hospitality of that kind is generosity in its oldest form."

Quijano has two children from his first marriage, Julio and Natasha, both of whom are tech-savvy after earning their college degrees in the U.S.

"My daughter, who recently got married, lives in Miami and works in high tech after starting her career in Silicon Valley," Quijano remarked. "And my son is also quite knowledgeable with all of these new things that are happening in the technology field. He is now in charge of our artificial intelligence department at the law firm. I see him on a daily basis and, unfortunately, I don't understand a lot of the things he does. Everything he's using on a daily basis at work is stuff he learned after college, and most of it on his own."

Quijano and his wife, Steffani, a nutritionist and Venezuelan native, recently welcomed a son to their family.

"Our son, Stefano, arrived July 18, and we are, once again, playing the role of parents," Quijano said with a smile. 

A hobby that has a special hold on Panamanian attorney

By Tom Kirvan

He considers it his “most important” hobby. He readily admits that it also ranks as a “very expensive hobby.”

And yet, despite the high stakes involved in breeding and racing Thoroughbreds, Panama City attorney Julio Quijano Berbey is more than willing to indulge his passion for horse ownership, believing that the rewards have far outweighed the risks during his involvement in the equine world.

“Thoroughbreds, of course, are competition horses meant for the racetrack,” said Quijano. “I’ve been a horse owner for about 40 years, but in

the last decade, I decided to diversify into breeding just because I wanted to experience a different side of the horse business.

“Now, having your own horses that you bred, it’s a different feeling and experience,” Quijano declared. “It’s like those horses are also my babies, giving me special joy as they grow, develop, and do well.”

Quijano said he currently owns about a dozen horses, some of which have already tasted success on the track.

“Several of mine have been winning races, while others are getting ready to run or are in the process of developing,”

Quijano related, saying that he doesn’t play favorites when it comes to his herd of Thoroughbreds. “I can honestly say that all of them are my favorites, with each requiring special care and attention.”

At least once or twice a year, Quijano will make the 2,150-mile trek from Panama City to the Bluegrass State of Kentucky to Keeneland Sales, the Thoroughbred auction house in Lexington where yearlings are sold each September while breeding stock are up for bid annually in November.

“I visit Kentucky quite often for breeding purposes and also to buy horses in auctions,” said Quijano. “The Keeneland auction is the best in the world, with the



Horse fancier Julio Quijano (far left in the standing group) is pictured with one of his prized Thoroughbreds, On the Loose, after a race in May.

best of the best offered for buyers there. I’ve bought a lot of horses there over the past decade.

“I’ve also attended the Kentucky Derby on several occasions,” he added, insisting that the first leg of the Triple Crown lives up to its billing as the “fastest two minutes in sports” that doubles as a spring fashion show for spectators parading around Churchill Downs in attention-grabbing outfits.

Quijano said his wife, Steffani, and his two adult children, Natasha and Julio, share his interest in horses to varying degrees.

“They come along to the races and pretend to like it, but they clearly enjoy the

spoils more,” he noted with a smile. “Like whenever we win an important race and the trophy is really good-looking, it never seems to make it to my house.”

Whether they win or lose at the track, the horses are part of Quijano’s equine operation, Babamwy Stables.

“I’m not one of the biggest horse breeders in Panama; I’m more middle of the road because this is something that I only do on a part-time basis,” Quijano indicated. “This is a very expensive hobby. So, maybe being busy at work on law-related matters keeps me a little bit honest concerning the amount of money that I spend on this leisure time activity.”

Quijano said that years ago he displayed one facet of his love for horses by riding regularly, whether on trails or the track.

“Now, I don’t ride anymore,” the 63-year-old attorney said emphatically. “At my age, you can ride, but that’s a guaranteed fall sooner or later. At this stage in life, it’s not a matter of whether or not you will fall – it’s a matter of when. It’s going to happen. That’s just the way it works as we get older.” 

Virginia equine lawyer pulls double duty in life

By Tom Kirvan

An equestrienne since she was a teen, attorney Nora Ciano is a lifelong animal lover and counts eight horses, two rescue dogs, and a three-legged cat among her prized possessions.



Nora T. Ciano
Member
Goodman Allen Donnelly

Virginia attorney Nora Ciano has been living a bit of a double life for the past eight years.

Foremost, she is a partner with Goodman Allen Donnelly, a suburban Richmond law firm in Glen Allen, where her practice focuses on health care defense and includes representing medical practitioners in investigations and hearings before their respective licensing boards. In recent years, her practice also has grown to include work in equine and animal law, two burgeoning fields where she has a particular interest and experience.

In her off hours, Ciano has parlayed her lifelong love of horses into a thriving business she started in 2018, a year after she bought a 10-acre farm in Hanover County, which is part of the Greater Richmond area.

Her business, named Kentwood Farm, initially was a horse boarding operation that turned in a different direction during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"One of my neighbors had been bugging me to give her kid lessons, and I kept saying, 'We don't really do lessons,' but she kept asking," said Ciano. "She really wanted to start her little girl in a regular riding program, and we have a horse that was really good for children's lessons. So, I started giving her once-a-week lessons, and then quickly realized that the money from lessons far outweighed the money from boarding. As a result, we converted the business into mainly lesson-based."

The number of weekly lessons, according to Ciano, began to surge during the pandemic.

"Everyone wanted to get out of their houses for some sort of activity during that time, so we really saw interest in riding lessons increase pretty

significantly," she said. "Currently, we have a pretty good mix of adults and children taking lessons on a regular basis. I teach lessons before and after work Mondays through Wednesdays, while I have a trainer who teaches Thursdays and another that teaches Saturdays."

As a proprietor, Ciano said the business serves as a nice outlet from the stress associated with a busy law practice.

"I tell everybody that it keeps me sane," Ciano said with a smile. "I'm using a different side of my brain when I'm at the farm."

A native of New York's Hudson Valley, Ciano displayed an interest in horses from an early age, convincing her parents to spring for a series of riding lessons that cemented a path to jumpers and later to dressage in her adult years.

"My parents were very supportive of my interests and bought me my first horse when I was 14," Ciano related. "That horse, which was a Thoroughbred, was with me for 16 years until I had to put him down several years ago at my current farm. I was really attached to him."

Now, as her business operation has grown, Ciano owns eight horses, six of which are ridden in her lesson program.

"I've been slowly and steadily buying horses over the years, and there is a whole science to doing that," she declared.

Which is where her legal background has become especially helpful, Ciano acknowledged.

"When I started the business, I handled all of the legal aspects of it, including setting up a proper business entity, creating boarding contracts, obtaining specialized insurance, and complying with all local zoning and state-specific equine liability

laws. There is a lot that goes into doing it the right way.”

In general terms, it’s a lesson she learned from her late father, George Ciano Jr., who owned a number of businesses, including a liquor store and the shopping center in which the store is still located.

“He was an entrepreneur and was involved in acquiring several other businesses with partners, but his mode of making a living for nearly 40 years was primarily the liquor store, which my mother (Jane) has taken over since his passing (of pancreatic cancer in March),” Ciano said of her father, who was an avid golfer and a diehard fan of the New York Yankees.

One of four daughters, Ciano said her interest in pursuing a legal career was piqued while she attended the University

of Richmond, the private liberal arts school with some 3,700 students. After graduating *magna cum laude* with a bachelor’s degree in political science and economics, Ciano earned her juris doctor degree from Penn State Law in 2015.

“I did a lot of public health work in undergrad and had several study abroad experiences (in Peru and the Czech Republic) geared towards public health,” said Ciano, who also spent a summer during law school studying in Chile. “So, I wanted to go into some type of health law, and a lot of my practice now is regulatory health care law.”

Her first job after law school was with a nonprofit and then for the state Medicaid department in Virginia, which served as a stepping stone for a part-time associate’s role with Goodman Allen Donnelly, a full-

service firm with four offices in Virginia. Within a matter of a few months, Ciano had proven herself worthy of a full-time position with the firm, handling a variety of health care-related cases.

She was mentored by Michael Goodman, one of the founding partners of the firm, who now is in a senior counsel role.

“Michael took me under his wing, and I learned everything I know in the health care field from him,” Ciano said. “I wouldn’t have a career without him. I wouldn’t have a caseload without him. He’s known as one of the best in the state in his specialty area.”

Goodman and other partners in the firm also allowed Ciano the opportunity to explore equine law as a book of business.



After a five-year courtship, Nora and her husband, Brett Shaffer, were married in 2024 and spent their honeymoon in South America. Brett is a contractor, specializing in kitchen and bathroom remodels. His handyman skills are particularly useful on the couple’s farm near Richmond. Pictured (l-r) are Nora, Brett, and daughter, Margaux.



In a treasured photo, Nora struck a pose with her childhood horse, Mack, at the Northcross barn in Wingdale, N.Y.

“Since I had my own equine business, I knew what others might need in setting up their own operation and what other business owners in the industry were having difficulty with, since a lot of the issues are contract law- or property law-based,” Ciano explained. “Disputes over horse ownership are also very common, so the firm let me tack that onto my health care practice.”

Ciano said that equine law is a specialized field covering all legal issues related to horses, including sales, boarding contracts, breeding, and ownership and liability disputes. It also ranks as a multidisciplinary legal field touching on contract, property, business, and tort law.

“Equine law varies significantly by state,” noted Ciano, particularly in how certain matters are defined and treated under liability statutes.

“In Virginia, for example, any animal is considered personal property,” she said. “So, there’s no such thing as malpractice since an animal does not have the same rights as a person. The most anybody can recover for ‘malpractice’ on a horse would

involving cases in which a horse owner fails to pay for boarding expenses.

“It depends on whether the owner is still responsive and decides that they can’t pay a \$600, \$2,000, or \$3,000 boarding bill, and then oftentimes we will ask them to relinquish their ownership rights to the barn,” she related. “In other cases, sometimes a boarder will just ghost and disappear off the face of the earth, and then we have to go about settling the matter in a different way.”

In the latter case, Ciano had some firsthand experience when a boarder skipped out on a bill, leaving their horse behind.

“If I really wanted to track the person down, I probably could have,” Ciano related. “But the horse that was left behind has turned out to be a great horse, and he will have a forever home with me.” 

be for the amount they spent on the faulty veterinary care or the replacement price of the animal.”

Ciano is regularly asked for advice on how best to handle ownership issues



Nora has a special bond with her three sisters. Pictured (l-r) are Elizabeth Bukowsky, Nora, Christine Ciano, and Kai Ciano.

Forward! A vision for Primerus 2027-2031

What we are building for, and the standard that will govern it



On the evening of July 18, 1840, a wooden paddle steamer called RMS Britannia came into Boston Harbor fourteen days after leaving Liverpool, and the city lost its composure entirely. Two thousand people paraded from the East Boston pier to the Maverick House. The Governor came. The Mayor came. Citizens presented a silver trophy nearly three feet tall to the Nova Scotian merchant standing on the deck, Samuel Cunard.

It is worth asking what they were celebrating, because it was not the ship. The ship was unimpressive.

Charles Dickens crossed on the Britannia in January 1842 and was unmoved. His stateroom was “utterly impracticable, thoroughly hopeless, and profoundly

preposterous,” a room no bigger than a hackney cab with two berths “than which nothing smaller for sleeping in was ever made except coffins.” Faster ships existed. More comfortable ships soon would.

What Cunard had that nobody else had was a schedule.

Before him, crossing the Atlantic meant depending on a sailing packet and the wind. You departed when the master judged it right and arrived when you arrived, which might be in three weeks and might be in seven. Cunard took a mail contract from the Admiralty and made a promise that sounds unremarkable now but was radical then. The ship sails on the published day. Full or empty. And it arrives. To keep it, he built what nobody had asked him for: terminals, coal depots, four sister ships,

so the timeline never depended on any single hull.

He was not selling a voyage. He was selling the elimination of doubt. That is a different product, and it is the one people paid for, the one people celebrated.

A values-driven society

Primerus is first and foremost a values-driven society. That is our differentiator. Not our size, not our reach, not our marketing.

We are not a referral network. A referral network is a directory with a transaction attached. Membership is purchased, coverage is the only question anybody asks, and the standard is whatever the

market will bear. Several of those exist and some are respectable businesses. This is not one of them.

Primerus is a society of lawyers genuinely committed to the profession and to the art and the science of practicing law. Lawyers who do the work well because doing it badly is intolerable to them. That is a temperament more than a credential, and it is the only thing we have ever really selected for.

The Six Pillars are that temperament written down. Integrity. Superior work product. Reasonable fees. Continuing legal education. Civility. Community service. They are not qualities we admire in ourselves. They are the standard that is set and the standard we adhere to, even when holding to it is expensive or hard. The Six Pillars are our sailing schedule, and their entire value is that we keep them.

There is a useful consequence, though it is downstream and never the point.

A general counsel who needs a lawyer in a city they have never visited cannot inspect the work before they buy it and often cannot evaluate it afterward. What they are often willing to pay more for, underneath the engagement letter, is the removal of doubt. This is why scale is so persuasive in our profession, and why no one was ever criticized by a board for hiring the largest firm available. Our answer is not better adjectives and certainly not a longer directory. It is a society of lawyers who hold to a standard whether or not anyone is checking. Values are not the soft thing in this business, they really are the only hard thing there is.

What we are for

I want Primerus to be a true companion to each independent firm in our alliance in two things.

The first is marketing and client development. We, as lawyers, compete for work against competitors whose marketing departments are larger than most of our

firms. That gap is real, it is not going away, and no single firm of 10, 20, 30, or 40 lawyers closes it alone. But together as a worldwide alliance, we can match – and even exceed – their size. A metric a general counsel recognizes and trusts. A map that answers their question before they run a search. Published proof of what our firms deliver, because one verified number outweighs a hundred pages of description.

The second is the development and growth of lawyers and of law firms, which includes the hardest problem most of you face: Finding good people and keeping them.

Every firm leader reading this carries a version of the same list. Succession never quite settled. A compensation model that made sense a decade ago. A lateral hire that did not take. An associate class that thins before the fifth year. A practice group with no leader. These problems feel private and personal. They are not. Somebody here has already solved the issue, paid for the lesson in full, and

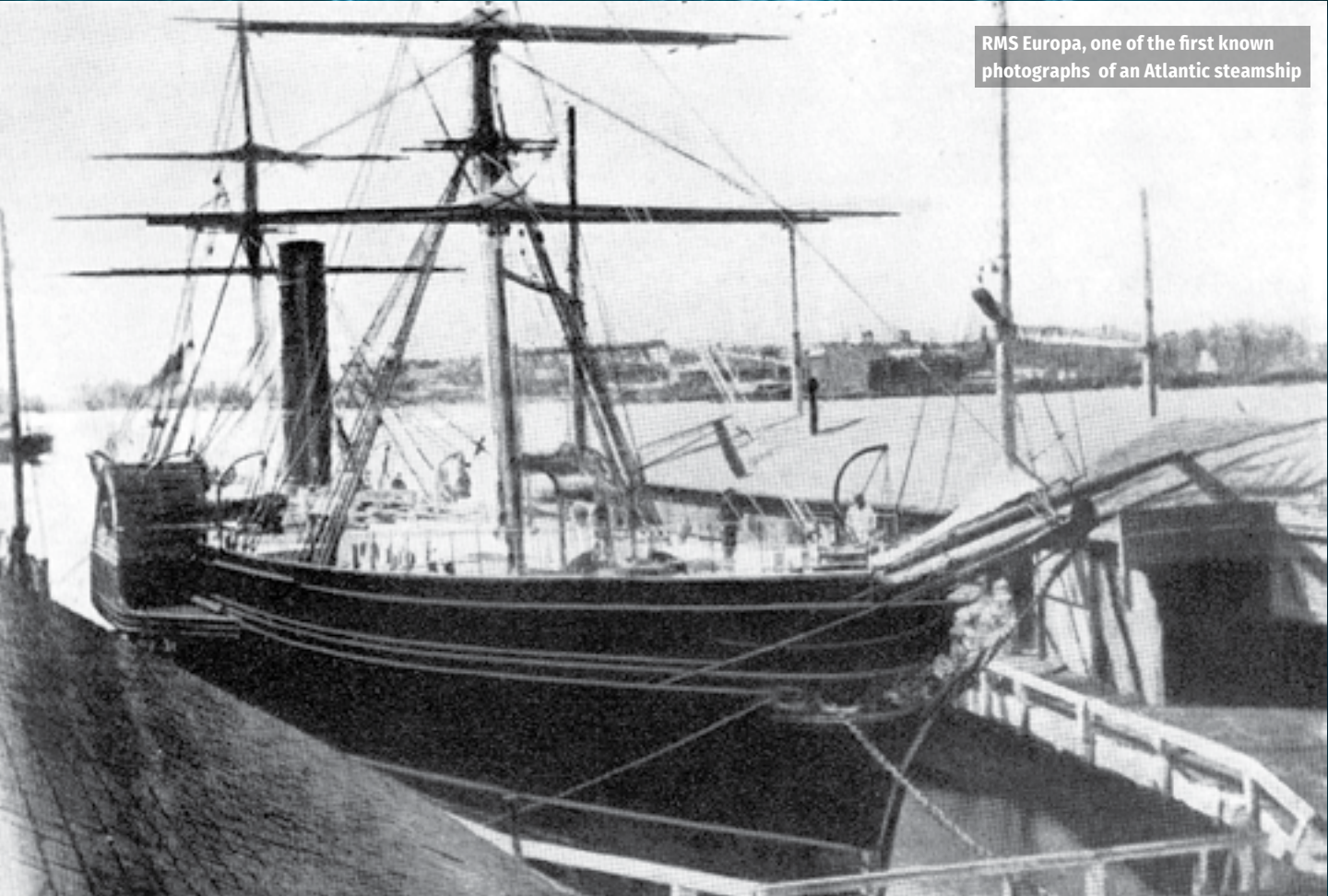


Steamship RMS Britannia of 1840 depicted by artist Charles E. Turner on her maiden Liverpool departure.

Charles E. Turner, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons



George H. Fergus, Chicago, 1874 (original copyright), Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons



before 1866, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

would tell you exactly how if you asked. That asset is almost entirely unspent.

We intend to build the equipment to spend it. Programs that turn young lawyers into the partners your firm will need. Peer groups where firm leaders work the actual problem instead of watching a panel discuss it. Working equipment, not benefits printed in a brochure.

Two mandates. Everything that follows is built to serve them.

Two houses, one standard

As fellow Primerus members, our insurance defense firm in Syracuse and our business firm in Vienna hold

the same values. However, they don't necessarily need the same things from our organization. An American insurance defense practice lives on carrier panels, billing guidelines, venue risk, and the economics of a trial calendar. A cross-border transactional practice in the Gulf lives on something else entirely. One structure asked to serve both tends, in the end, to serve neither especially well.

So, we are going to build two.

Two divisions: Primerus North America and Primerus International, each led by its own president on the Primerus staff, each accountable for the particular needs of the firms inside it. Under Primerus North America will sit three groups: the Defense

Institute, the Business Law Institute, and the Personal Injury Institute. Under Primerus International there will sit three more: Latin America (LATAM), Europe with the Middle East and Africa (EMEA), and Asia Pacific (APAC). Six divisions, drawn along the two lines that should matter to a practicing lawyer, what you do and where you do it.

Each of the six gets two leaders, and the pairing is the point.

The first is an executive director on the Primerus staff who owns that division and nothing else, with a job description short enough to fit on a card. Build the membership. Maintain it through the support of the members already here.

A professional who owns EMEA and nothing else will come to know EMEA the way you know your own courthouse.

The second is a vice president, and the vice president is one of you.

Where the decisions get made

Those six vice presidents will come from our member lawyers, and each will carry a second title: group director. Together they will constitute a Board of Group Directors, seated alongside the corporate Board of Directors that already exists.

They are not appointed. Each will be popularly elected by the member firms of the group they represent. The defense

firms elect the defense seat. The EMEA firms elect the EMEA seat, and so on. One firm, one vote, all the way down. I want that mechanism understood, because an appointed board is a courtesy and an elected one is an obligation, and the difference will be felt in every hard decision Primerus makes over the next decade.

The corporate board will continue to handle corporate matters, as it must. The Board of Group Directors will hold authority over the questions that determine what it actually means to be a Primerus firm. The standard and how it is applied. Who is admitted. What we ask of one another. How and where we gather. Those decisions belong to the people who

live with the consequences and have to act on the decisions, and those people are member lawyers.

So the design runs on two rails the length of the organization. A professional in every group whose full-time job is to build it and serve it, and a member above that professional whose seat at the governing table is not honorary. The staff carry the work. The members hold the standard.

That is where a society of the members, by the members, for the members either becomes true or stays decoration. Firms that help govern an institution do not drift away from it. Ownership of the standard is the most durable retention program

ever devised, and it costs nothing but the willingness to share the room.

The map

A vision without math is a wish, so here is the math when it comes to our desired growth during the next four years.

In North America: 75 Defense Institute firms, 75 Business Law Institute firms, 50 Personal Injury Institute firms.

Internationally: 150 firms – 50 each across LATAM, EMEA, and APAC.

350 firms concentrated deliberately in the geographies and practice groups where our members and their clients actually do business. All operating within their exclusive territories, as has been the

case since day one of Primerus. Nothing changes when it comes to exclusivity; the difference will be more firms via concentrated and dedicated efforts by Primerus and its member firms to expand our society.

Density is not the product. The values are. But a strong and vibrant membership across many geographies does a great deal for the membership itself, and that deserves saying plainly. It means a colleague to call at seven in the morning about a jurisdiction you have never practiced in. It means somewhere to send a client without gambling your own reputation on the introduction. It means a larger classroom, more people worth learning from, more firms that have already faced whatever you are facing right now. And it means the credential

itself carries further, because it is recognized in more rooms. Every firm we add extends the reach of the standard and the worth of holding it.

Now the harder part: Expansion with adherence to the standard.

The temptation in any growth plan is courting the almost right firm in the market you need. I name it here while it is theoretical and easy to refuse, because it will not stay theoretical. That is the one move that would cost us the enterprise, and not because a single admission does much damage. Every exception makes the next easier to justify, and a standard that bends is not a standard. It is a preference.

A gap on the map is a problem to solve. A firm that does not belong is a problem



Tilmann R, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons



Bedford Lemere, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

The 1916 Cunard Building in Liverpool, designed by Willink & Thicknesse

that compounds. I would rather explain an open market to a client than explain the inclusion of a firm that doesn't meet our standard.

The pace and the order

A vision printed in a magazine implies that everything arrives at once. None of this will.

I intend for Primerus to be fully in this format by 2031. Growth – step by methodical and careful step. I would rather tell you that plainly than promise you a transformation by next summer that neither of us would believe. The order matters as much as the pace.

Governance comes first. The Board of Group Directors gets seated in early 2027 before anything else is built, because the members should hold the standard before the organization grows underneath it, not

afterward. That is the one piece I do not intend to phase.

Everything else follows growth, in that order and not the reverse. The groups fill out as the membership does. An executive director is hired when the firms they will serve are actually there. All of it funded without debt.

That sequence is not timidity. It rests on a discipline that is not open for discussion. Primerus carries no debt and we will not take any on. Every hire and every program is paid for out of revenue we've earned, which paces growth against what this organization can genuinely support rather than what it can be talked into. Slower than borrowing, certainly. It is also why Primerus will still be here, unencumbered and answerable to nobody but its members, long after the current fashion in legal networks has passed. Nobody

ever lost a business they did not owe money on.

So, the method is incremental, deliberately so. Build, grow, build again. Small, disciplined wins on a cadence, repeated until they compound and the thing rolls on its own. That beats the heroic quarter every time.

And it will be done in the open; collaboratively, transparently, and in constant communication. You will hear from me about what is working and what is not, and you will hear it while you can still do something about it.

Rooms worth flying to

Cunard's schedule was worth nothing until the ship was in the harbor, which brings me to how we gather.

Every registration is now weighed against a real alternative: a client call, a hearing, a child's game, a weekend that does not require an airport. That calculation has changed permanently, and the organizations doing well accepted it rather than waiting for the old days of meeting attendance before COVID to return.

So, the meetings are being rebuilt. Cities worth the flight, hotels chosen rather than merely booked. Registration priced so attending is an easy decision instead of an annual argument with your own budget. Programming stripped of anything a memo could have done, because what a room gives you that a screen never will is the unrepeatable conversation, the dinner that runs two hours long, the colleague you would not otherwise have met.

And clients on the stage as participants rather than guests. A general counsel who travels to a Primerus meeting needs

a substantive reason to be in the room, and we intend to give them one. Every event will answer one question before the program is set. Why is this worth leaving home for? When the answer is honest and specific, the registration takes care of itself.

To the clients reading this

You are on this distribution list deliberately, and I would rather speak to you than about you.

When you need counsel in a jurisdiction where you have no relationships, the search is a cost and the uncertainty is a risk, and neither appears on an invoice. Our proposition is that a Primerus firm in a market you do not know carries the same reasonable expectation of excellence as the one you already know and trust. That is what the standard is for. Everything we

build to develop our firms is built so they serve you better.

And you are entitled to hold us to the Six Pillars directly. Ask whether the lawyer you hired is the lawyer doing the work. Ask whether anyone will tell you plainly when a fee is about to become unreasonable. You should be able to answer yes. If you cannot, tell us, because that is the only way we will know.

What we are committing to

Plans are easy to admire and hard to be held to, so here is what we are putting in writing.

One. The values lead. The standard will not move to fill a gap, not for a market we need, not for revenue we would like, not in a hard quarter. If you ever see it move, say so out loud.

Two. Governance will be shared. The Board of Group Directors will be seated with genuine authority over the matters that define membership, and you will elect it. Your vote, your representative, your standard.

Three. We will not borrow. Primerus is debt-free and will stay that way. Growth gets funded out of what we earn, which makes it incremental, and I will not apologize for that.

Four. We will be measured against the two mandates. Whether we made you better known to the clients you want, and whether we made your firm and your lawyers better. The structure exists for that and nothing else.

Five. Every meeting will justify itself. Priced to attend, curated to respect your practice, built around the conversations you cannot have anywhere else.

Six. You will hear from Primerus often. Regularly and in plain language.

Sail on the day

Cunard's promise was never that the crossing would be pleasant. Ask Dickens. It was that the ship left on the published day and arrived at the other end, and that a merchant in Liverpool could build a business around that fact.

We are in the same trade. Not the business of being the largest network, which we will never be and should not want to be. The business of being the one a serious client, and a serious lawyer, can rely on without having to check, without having to wait for every outside factor to be in place.

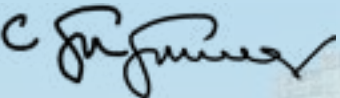
The span of time from 2027 to 2031 is not long, but it is long enough if we do the unglamorous thing on cadence and refuse the shortcut every time it is offered. And it

will be offered. I am not confident because of the plan. Plans are ordinary and any competent person can produce one. I am confident because of who chose to be here.

The ship sails on the published day.

Forward! 

Best regards,



Christian B. Stegmaier

The Port of Liverpool is a deep-water port on the River Mersey in England that can accommodate container cargo, bulk goods, and cruise ships.

Winning formula

A topflight trial attorney shares the art of his craft

By Tom Kirvan

Attorney Tom Winner is proud to have addressed Primerus Trial Skills Academy participants on the topic of advocacy in both 2025 and 2026.



Thomas E. Winner
Senior Partner
Winner & Booze

Fresh from a two-week trip to France with his brother, Las Vegas attorney Thomas “Tom” Winner was in a reflective mood when he sat down recently for an interview about several of the compelling cases he has tried and some of the important courtroom lessons that he has learned over a 32-year career as a prominent trial lawyer in Nevada.

“If you can believe this, I have not, since law school, taken two weeks in a row completely off work,” said Winner, a founding partner of Winner & Booze, a firm that defends personal injury cases and helps untangle complex insurance disputes.

The “boys’ trip” with his older brother, Bob, whom he describes as a “mentor” and a “wily trial lawyer,” offered the two a chance to unwind, to explore some of the sightseeing destinations in and around Paris, to visit a few of Hemingway’s favorite haunts, and to even reminisce about the only case that the two tried together.

It remains Winner’s “favorite case” out of the hundreds he has litigated during a career that began after he graduated from law school at the University of Nebraska. The 2013 trial followed years of highly contentious litigation.

“We represented a man who crashed into the back of a truck that was parked on the side of the highway,” Winner said of the case. “He nearly died from his injuries and was in a medically induced coma for days while doctors performed surgery after surgery in an effort to keep him alive.

“He had a severe traumatic brain injury, a punctured lung, and dozens of fractures,” Winner said of his client. “His past medical bills alone were more than a million dollars, in 2008 dollars. One of the doctors said he had ‘never seen any patient who got hurt so badly and still

lived.’ He became known as the ‘medical miracle of the year’ at University Medical Center Hospital.”

To make matters worse, their client also the defendant in the case, being sued by the truck driver who had pulled his rig onto the shoulder, inches away from highway traffic, to adjust a strap.

What started out as strictly a defense case shifted when the evidence revealed the opportunity to counterclaim, Winner indicated.

“The plaintiff had parked his commercial truck on the shoulder in a non-emergency situation, barely clearing the highway,” Winner said. “He was parked without cones or flares, just inches from high-speed traffic, on a stretch with a 75-mile-per-hour speed limit, despite an exit being well within view.”

Winner brought in his brother to co-counsel the newly launched counterclaim. Together, they navigated a grueling three-week trial against a formidable opposing legal team, stepping in after the trucker’s insurer refused to offer a dime.

Working in legal tandem, the Winner brothers were able to show that the plaintiff truck driver had unwisely parked his truck inches from highway traffic in a non-emergency situation.

“He was within sight of the next exit, and we thought that the safe thing was for him to pull over on an exit, clear of traffic on a highway with a 75-mile-per-hour speed limit,” Winner added. “We also received some testimony that he wasn’t even in the truck when the accident happened, that he was outside adjusting the strap. So, the jury thought, ‘Boy, this guy’s not truthful.’ We managed to persuade the jury that the trucker was largely responsible, even though the collision happened on the

shoulder. By comparison, our client was just a saint, a former Marine who was an honor to represent.”

The trial lasted three weeks and pitted the brothers against “some really top-notch lawyers on the other side,” according to Winner. After years of subsequent appeals, a binding arbitration, and a bad faith lawsuit against the trucker’s insurer, the Winners secured financial security for a deserving client. It remains among the most difficult, but satisfying, trials of Winner’s long career.

The case, while stressful and eventually successful for the Winner legal team, also had one lighter moment.

“Initially, we were afraid a jury wouldn’t like that two brothers were together representing the same party,” Winner noted.

At one point during the trial, Bob asked a question to which Tom instinctively objected.

“It drew a laugh from the courtroom,” Winner said with a smile. “It wasn’t intentional, but looking back, maybe it humanized us a little bit.”

Winner grew up in Western Nebraska, the son of a West Point graduate turned small-town lawyer and a British mother who devoted herself to raising the couple’s six children and volunteering extensively in their local parish and community. Winner’s father had a dry wit and a knack for writing and storytelling – traits his children actively tried to absorb.

Aside from his brother, Bob, Winner also has a sister who is a lawyer (“way smarter than I am”) and a younger brother who writes, meaning that the legal and literary roots run deep in his family.

One of Winner’s sons, Charlie, is a student at San Diego State University and is eyeing law school. Winner’s older son, Max, is a brainy student of IT living in Des Moines, Ia.

After beginning his legal career with a mid-size firm that specialized in liability

defense cases, in 2004 Winner took a leap of faith with three colleagues to launch their own firm, which now is known as Winner & Booze.

Standing at 6-feet, 3-inches tall, Winner is sometimes asked whether he played basketball in high school or college. His response is characteristically self-effacing.

“I tell them, ‘No, I have a three-quarters of an inch vertical leap and flat feet, and I’m spectacularly uncoordinated,’” Winner shared.

That grounded, approachable demeanor helps make him a natural storyteller when addressing a jury. It is an authenticity rooted in the foundational, disciplined advice he received from his father.

“Be a gentleman first,” Winner recalled his father gently reminding him. “He taught me that a lawyer’s reputation means everything. A lawyer should always practice with integrity and treat others with old-fashioned courtesy. Your opponent, the judge, and your client



As one of Nevada’s most prominent trial attorneys, Tom regularly appears as a featured speaker before state and national legal organizations.

should all be able to take you at your word. He also told me that a lawyer who gets a reputation for settling all his cases will suffer for it, and his clients will suffer for it, too.”

About trial work, Winner’s father relayed a sound warning.

“He told me this about trial work: ‘The highs are high, but the lows are low, and the lows stay with you longer,’” Winner noted, nodding with deep appreciation and agreement.

As he began his career in the sometime hard-knocks world of trial work, Winner soon discovered that “you learn a lot more from the cases you lose than the cases you win.” In defeat, “you learn that experience can be a harsh teacher,” he insisted.

Winner has willingly shared such wisdom with those who have sought his trial advice over the years. He also had the opportunity to be among the featured co-presenters in the inaugural Primerus Trial Skills Academy in 2025, addressing participants on advocacy, and he will reprise his role in this year’s version of the program.

In 2016, Winner was inducted into the invitation-only American Board of Trial Advocates (ABOTA), an association of more than 7,000 highly experienced trial lawyers dedicated to elevating the standards of integrity, civility, and professionalism in the legal profession.

A few years later, he was invited to join the Litigation Council of America (LCA) and to speak at its Renaissance Symposium at the Harvard Club in New York City, where

he addressed the group on trial skills and jury selection.

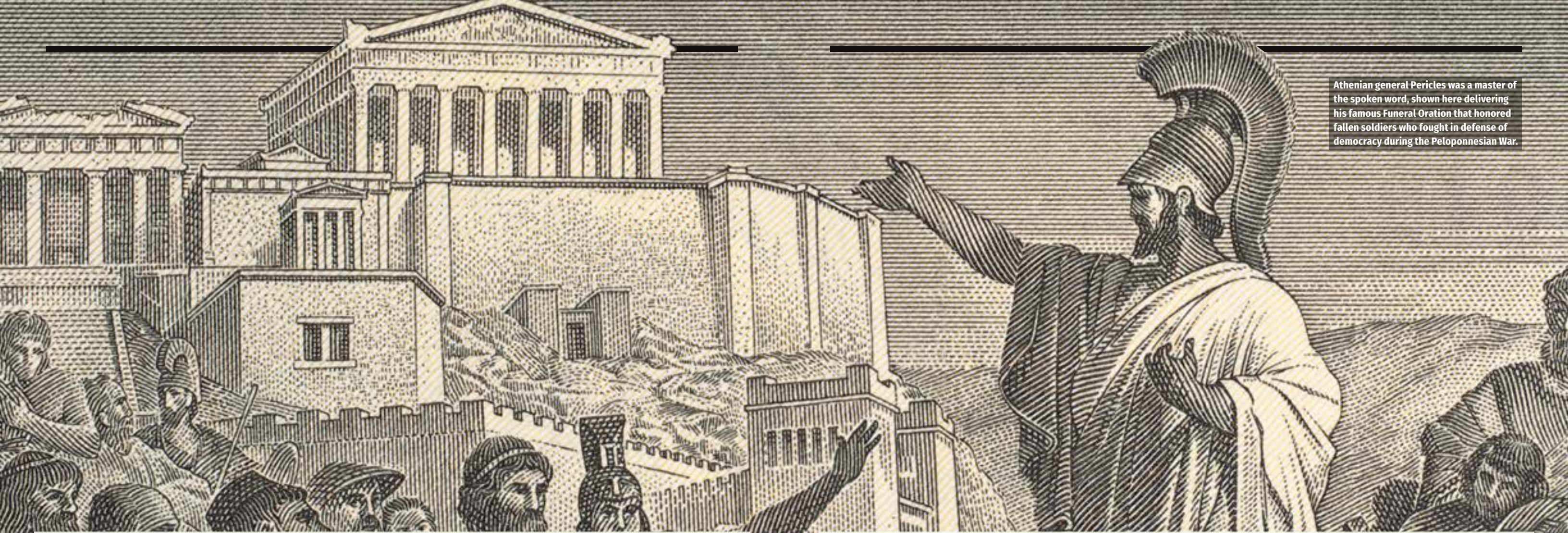
“I was very gratified to receive that invitation because the LCA includes some of the best litigators in the country,” Winner remarked. “Pretty high clover for a kid from Nebraska.”

When mentoring young lawyers at his firm, Winner regularly emphasizes the importance of preparedness.

“The lawyer who works hard always has a leg up on the lawyer who thinks he’s the smartest person in the room,” said Winner. “The attorney who works harder will usually do better than the less-prepared guy. There isn’t a magic formula, and there never was. You’re paid to think and to prepare.”



Hepner Hall on the campus of San Diego State University, where Tom’s son is a pre-law student.



Athenian general Pericles was a master of the spoken word, shown here delivering his famous Funeral Oration that honored fallen soldiers who fought in defense of democracy during the Peloponnesian War.

Part of that operational excellence comes down to the team standing behind the trial lawyer, and Winner is quick to credit his support staff for keeping the firm's wheels turning smoothly.

"A great paralegal is like a great center on a football team – you don't notice they're there, but somehow everything works," Winner explained. "I've been incredibly fortunate to have an organized and patient team. Honestly, I think their job is harder than mine."

Many lawyers can give dazzling closing arguments, and many more think they can. But for Winner, a trial's outcome is often decided long before those final summations even begin.

"In many respects, the most important part of the trial is jury selection and the second is getting off on the right foot with

the jury," Winner said. "If it's a real jump ball, a good summation is important. But most cases are decided long before that.

"I think that the most underrated and important portion of the trial is the opening statement," he declared. "An opening statement that engages and tells a cohesive story will keep you on equal footing with a skillful opponent. An effective opening will prime the jury to hear the evidence the way you hope they'll hear it. The best opening statements happen after correctly deducing your opponent's strategy. With a little thought and some preparation, you can sometimes neutralize your opponent's next move."

Winner recalled putting this preemptive strategy into practice during one memorable trial where he accurately predicted which witness his opponent would call first and anticipated the

scripted questions that would be asked. Having forecast the exact sequence in his opening statement, he watched as the jurors turned and smiled.

"I believe in using PowerPoint or some other visual tool, as jurors remember what they see better than what they hear," he maintained.

As a young lawyer, that meant an overhead projector and a whiteboard. Years ago, he became a proponent of using clean visual aids and PowerPoints because he watched the best plaintiff lawyers using them so effectively.

"Jurors remember pictures far better than they recall words," he said. "If you can visually tell a good, cohesive story about the facts, you can at least hold serve, if not win an advantage before the deliberation even starts."

But an overly cluttered PowerPoint, or a drawn-out opening, can quickly turn whatever advantage you had squarely against you, he warned. It's a lesson many lawyers learn the hard way. He has watched skillful multi-media presentations dazzle, and he also has seen them fall completely flat. Those that lack punch are usually presented by lawyers who simply don't know when to sit down. An often-overlooked weapon in a trial attorney's arsenal is "restraint," according to Winner.

"I have to remind myself to shut up sometimes," he admitted. "Brevity is the soul of wit."

Some of the best cross-examinations Winner has ever witnessed were over within 20 minutes, he said. And he also has seen "brilliant lawyers skewer an expert witness where the ultimate impact doesn't

land, simply because they kept going long after they should have stopped."

And when it comes to the topic of summation, Winner draws inspiration from legal mentors of his youth, stepping back in time to Ancient Greece when a general named Pericles was at the forefront. Historians believe the Athenian leader was a master of psychological motivation who could inspire his troops by connecting their military duties directly to their personal freedom.

"I heard an amazing Southern gentleman lawyer give a talk about summations 30 years ago," Winner recalled. "And that lawyer spoke eloquently of Demosthenes and Pericles. It has stuck with me ever since. As the story goes, when Cicero or Demosthenes spoke, the people would remark about what a fine speaker that man was. But after Pericles spoke, they

said, 'Let us march.' The final goal of a closing argument is that the jurors should hear in your voice the words of Pericles, and say, 'Let us march.' You hope to motivate them to act."

It is a high standard, an immense amount of pressure, and a reminder of the unique weight a trial lawyer carries every time they appear before a jury, according to Winner.

"It's a hell of a tough job, and my dad was right – the lows stay with you longer, but the highs are high," Winner reflected. "But I was never going to cut it as a basketball player. So, I'm grateful to have a job where I'm paid to read, to write, to listen, to speak, and to think. We lawyers need to remember what a privilege we have." 

Profound sense of purpose

Trinidad-based law firm continues its sterling community service work

By Tom Kirvan

Queen's Royal College is a premier public secondary school for boys in the Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Martin A. George
Senior Partner & Lead Counsel
Martin George & Company

Giving back to the community and assisting the less fortunate are two defining qualities of the Primerus firm of Martin George & Company in the twin-island nation of Trinidad and Tobago.

The law firm's outreach work, according to founder Martin George, goes beyond providing tangible aid, as it also bridges socioeconomic divides, inspires empathy, and creates an "interconnectedness" among those from all walks of life.

"It reminds us of our shared humanity," said George, who has headed the firm since its founding in 1992 and has consistently encouraged members of his legal team to stay engaged in community service causes. "We have a legacy of commitment to community service and remain steadfast in our service to the less fortunate and the disadvantaged in our society here in Trinidad and Tobago."

In particular, Martin George & Company continues to work with the Liz Williams Foundation, he indicated. The foundation has been a powerful force on the charitable front since its creation in

2015, providing "back-to-school supplies for needy children, including books, backpacks, and other school essentials," according to George.

"We also have officially adopted the Happy Haven School for Children with Disabilities and are their main sponsor for many of their social and sporting events," George noted, proudly pointing to the outfits that the firm purchased for children participating Happy Haven's annual Sports Day event.

In addition, George said his law firm "also continues our work with our own signature foundation," This-Ability, which was established in 2013.

"This-Ability is a nonprofit organization created to enhance and showcase the abilities of the disabled members of our society in Trinidad and Tobago by focusing not on the disability, but instead on the positives by showing the world that they have 'This-Ability,'" remarked George, adding that the foundation helps the firm strengthen community ties while filling gaps in support for underserved populations.

"We have a skills-bank of 'Talents & Abilities' for which job opportunities and performing engagements are sourced and sought for the members so that society will focus less on the disability and instead be more amazed and enchanted by 'This-Ability,'" he said. "So, to put it in the simplest and most relatable terms, imagine a young Stevie Wonder, who instead of everyone focusing on the fact that he's blind, instead he gets the recognition, support, promotion, and opportunities from an organization which embraces his talents and abilities for singing, playing the piano, and entertaining and showcases this to the world. This is the founding principle and ethos of This-Ability." 

The logo for This-Ability reflects a community that "embraces and supports people with disabilities," according to the foundation's mission.

Insurance expert relishes the challenge of untangling tough legal problems

By Brian Cox

California attorney and insurance coverage expert Blane Smith embraces a positive outlook despite spending his career helping clients navigate conflict.



Blane A. Smith
Insurance Law Expert
Law Office of Blane A. Smith

Blane Smith is a self-confessed “stubborn man.”

Sheer stubbornness got him through law school and later helped him develop into an expert in the property and casualty field.

For more than four decades, Smith has built a reputation as one of California’s foremost authorities on insurance coverage. Attorneys seek him out as a consultant and expert witness. Insurance companies turn to him for guidance on complex coverage disputes and bad faith claims. He has authored scholarly works, taught continuing legal education courses, argued significant appellate cases, and advised clients on some of the state’s most consequential insurance matters.

None of that, however, was part of any carefully constructed career plan.

“I attended law school with the idea, well, ‘I’ll see how this goes,’” Smith said with characteristic understatement. “And I’m still seeing how it goes.”

The remark captures both the wry humor and quiet confidence that have defined Smith’s career. While his résumé reflects decades of specialization and accomplishment, he is far more inclined to tell stories about faceplanting onto his bed after a miserable day at his first legal job or joke that his path into law began because “Ken Burns hadn’t been invented yet.”

Growing up in Washington’s Puget Sound region, first in Kirkland and later in the Navy town of Bremerton, Smith imagined a future shaped less by statutes than by history. He earned degrees in history and speech education, completed student teaching, and genuinely enjoyed the classroom. Teaching seemed like a perfectly respectable future.

Law became an option for practical reasons.

“People who do [intercollegiate debate] either grow up to be debate coaches or they go into law,” he said. “And I ended up in law.”

There was another influence as well. Smith admired the father of one of his high school friends, a respected local attorney whose practice reflected an era when lawyers routinely handled everything from criminal defense to land development.

“I really liked him, and I really admired him,” Smith recalled. “So, I think he undoubtedly had some kind of influence on my thinking.”

After earning his law degree from the University of the Pacific McGeorge School of Law in 1980, Smith says his first months after the bar exam looked nothing like the beginning of the legal career he would ultimately build. Living cheaply with roommates, he spent his mornings reading the newspaper, playing pool, and writing appellate briefs subcontracted through his girlfriend.

“It was just so laid back,” he recalls.

A friend soon recruited him to a workers’ compensation practice, where the hiring process was not rigorous.

“They took the résumé and went like that,” Smith laughed, mimicking someone tossing it over their shoulder. “‘When can you start?’”

The attorney who hired him became, in Smith’s estimation, the finest boss he ever had. The work itself, however, left him miserable.

He found little room for the kind of legal analysis he enjoyed. The practice revolved around injury ratings and benefit



Blane and his wife, Shannon, enjoy hiking in the Sierra Nevada mountain range. They have been married nearly four decades.

schedules rather than untangling difficult legal questions.

One evening, after arriving home from work, his girlfriend casually asked whether he had remembered to stop by the dry cleaners.

"I did a face plant on the bed and screamed as loud as I could."

The reaction surprised even him.

"It was the kind of law that I hated."

An opportunity soon arrived through another friend, this one at Sacramento defense firm Thompson Heller. The move to California proved transformative.

Compared with the disorder he had experienced previously, Thompson Heller felt organized, professional, and intellectually engaging. More importantly,

it introduced him to the area of law that would define the rest of his career.

Initially, Smith was hardly considered a rising star.

"I think my senior partner was quick to conclude that I probably was not going to survive there," he said with a laugh.

Then an insurance coverage question landed on his desk after several more experienced attorneys had been unable to solve it.

"They handed it to me," Smith recalled. "And I aced it."

That assignment changed everything.

Insurance coverage law asks deceptively simple questions: Does this policy apply? What obligations does an insurer owe? How should language written years earlier

be interpreted under an entirely different set of facts?

Smith discovered he loved the intellectual challenge. The work suited both his temperament and his stubborn streak. Over time, Smith became known for seeing nuances in insurance policies that others overlooked.

For more than 25 years, attorneys have retained Smith as both a confidential consultant and an expert witness on insurance coverage and claims handling. His opinions have supported litigation involving construction defects, wrongful death claims, environmental contamination, insurance fraud, civil rights actions, and high-exposure bad faith disputes. He has appeared in significant published appellate decisions, authored continuing reviews of insurance law developments, contributed to the Continuing Education of the Bar treatise "California Property Insurance, Law and

Litigation," and trained generations of lawyers and insurance professionals through seminars and continuing education programs.

Ironically, Smith said, many of the most valuable lessons did not come from senior partners.

"The people who taught me how to do what I do were claims adjusters," he shared.

Experienced adjusters, many decades into their own careers, patiently explained the realities that no law school casebook could teach.

"I'd come up with my academic law school ideas," he said. "They'd listen patiently, and when I was done, they'd say, 'Okay, here's what we're going to do.'"

It became an education grounded in experience.

Years later, the California insurance landscape shifted dramatically as judicial philosophy evolved and insurers no longer depended on outside counsel in quite the same way. Many attorneys moved away from insurance work altogether.

Smith never considered abandoning it.

"I think I'm really good at it," he said.

As his longtime firm dissolved amid changing priorities, Smith joined Craig Farmer's insurance-focused practice in 1996, beginning another successful chapter that ultimately evolved into Farmer Smith & Lane.

Unlike his previous firm, this one remained fully committed to insurance law. If changing firms represented one evolution in Smith's career, opening his own practice represented another.

It was not, however, something he had spent years dreaming about.

"I had never wanted to hang up my shingle," he said. "I never wanted to be a businessman."

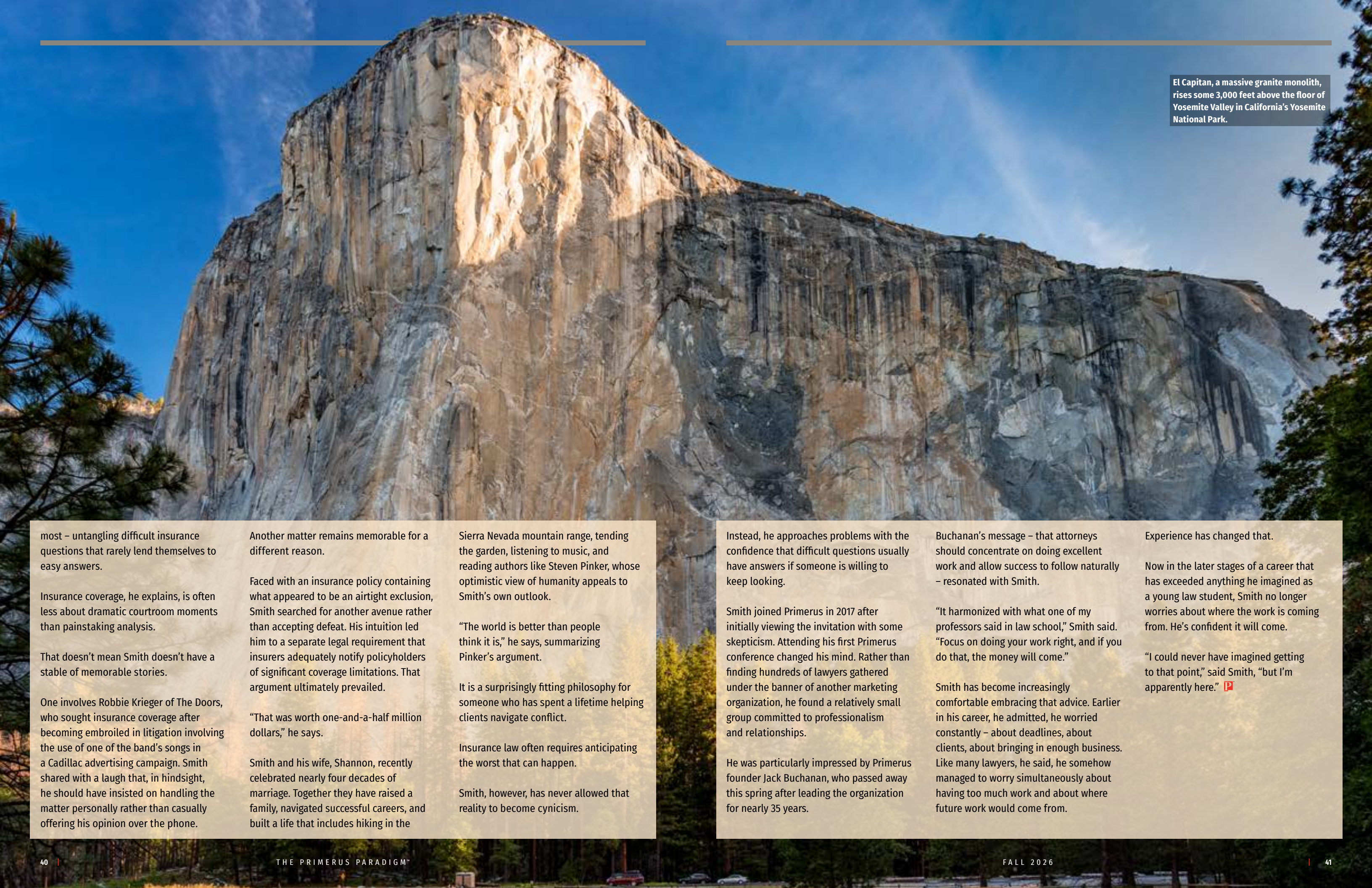
Instead, Smith credits much of his successful transition in 2020 to surrounding himself with capable people, particularly the office manager who had worked with him previously.

"I happen to have an office manager who is my businesswoman," he said. "She takes care of all that stuff, and blessed am I."

The Law Office of Blane A. Smith now focuses exclusively on insurance law, representing insurers in coverage disputes and bad faith litigation while also serving as a trusted resource for attorneys seeking consultation or expert testimony. The boutique structure allows Smith to devote his attention to the work he enjoys



A carpet of wildflowers adds a special glow to the Sierra Nevada mountain range that runs roughly 400 miles along the eastern edge of California.



El Capitan, a massive granite monolith, rises some 3,000 feet above the floor of Yosemite Valley in California's Yosemite National Park.

most – untangling difficult insurance questions that rarely lend themselves to easy answers.

Insurance coverage, he explains, is often less about dramatic courtroom moments than painstaking analysis.

That doesn't mean Smith doesn't have a stable of memorable stories.

One involves Robbie Krieger of The Doors, who sought insurance coverage after becoming embroiled in litigation involving the use of one of the band's songs in a Cadillac advertising campaign. Smith shared with a laugh that, in hindsight, he should have insisted on handling the matter personally rather than casually offering his opinion over the phone.

Another matter remains memorable for a different reason.

Faced with an insurance policy containing what appeared to be an airtight exclusion, Smith searched for another avenue rather than accepting defeat. His intuition led him to a separate legal requirement that insurers adequately notify policyholders of significant coverage limitations. That argument ultimately prevailed.

"That was worth one-and-a-half million dollars," he says.

Smith and his wife, Shannon, recently celebrated nearly four decades of marriage. Together they have raised a family, navigated successful careers, and built a life that includes hiking in the

Sierra Nevada mountain range, tending the garden, listening to music, and reading authors like Steven Pinker, whose optimistic view of humanity appeals to Smith's own outlook.

"The world is better than people think it is," he says, summarizing Pinker's argument.

It is a surprisingly fitting philosophy for someone who has spent a lifetime helping clients navigate conflict.

Insurance law often requires anticipating the worst that can happen.

Smith, however, has never allowed that reality to become cynicism.

Instead, he approaches problems with the confidence that difficult questions usually have answers if someone is willing to keep looking.

Smith joined Primerus in 2017 after initially viewing the invitation with some skepticism. Attending his first Primerus conference changed his mind. Rather than finding hundreds of lawyers gathered under the banner of another marketing organization, he found a relatively small group committed to professionalism and relationships.

He was particularly impressed by Primerus founder Jack Buchanan, who passed away this spring after leading the organization for nearly 35 years.

Buchanan's message – that attorneys should concentrate on doing excellent work and allow success to follow naturally – resonated with Smith.

"It harmonized with what one of my professors said in law school," Smith said. "Focus on doing your work right, and if you do that, the money will come."

Smith has become increasingly comfortable embracing that advice. Earlier in his career, he admitted, he worried constantly – about deadlines, about clients, about bringing in enough business. Like many lawyers, he said, he somehow managed to worry simultaneously about having too much work and about where future work would come from.

Experience has changed that.

Now in the later stages of a career that has exceeded anything he imagined as a young law student, Smith no longer worries about where the work is coming from. He's confident it will come.

"I could never have imagined getting to that point," said Smith, "but I'm apparently here." 

Founder envisioned a distinctly different kind of business firm

By Tom Kirvan

A marketing law, technology, and soft IP attorney, Alina Lee has focused much of her practice on providing clients with practical and effective legal counsel for marketing campaigns, new technologies, new products, online subscription sales, effective deal negotiations, and legal strategy support.



Alina Lee
Founding Partner
Aspire Law

When Alina Lee started her own law firm five years ago, she did so with a novel idea in mind.

Strike a true work-life balance.

Since her time in law school, Lee had been steadfast in her belief that finding a “genuine work-life” balance for everyone on the legal team she was assembling would be pivotal to the firm’s ultimate success.

Her work perspective was altered after spending the initial stages of her legal career in Big Law and then in the corporate world with a major utility company and a leading marketing tech platform.

“I felt that the common narrative in Big Law and corporate America is that there’s no such thing as a work-life balance,” Lee declared. “They want you to believe that it’s normal and okay to be frantic for the rest of your career until you retire. I never believed that message.”

As a result, Lee pictured a different model that now embodies the firm’s mission and vision: “Empowering Clients. Transforming Lives. Happy Lawyers Everywhere.” The three-part message reflects Lee’s commitment to both client results and attorney well-being at the Atlanta-based Aspire Law, the virtual law firm she founded in February 2021, less than a year after the COVID-19 crisis began.

“Everything was virtual at that time and the rapid shift to remote work proved that many industries and businesses could successfully operate digitally,” said Lee, touting the value of technology and workplace adaptability in the wake of the pandemic.

Lee started her firm at the urging of her husband, Alex Meier, who at the time was



Built on one of the higher points of Atlanta, the Georgia State Capitol features a golden dome that serves as a visual and historic landmark in the city.

an employment attorney with a prominent firm in Atlanta.

“We were on a road trip, and it was going to take five or six hours to get where we were going, so he asked me to hear him out,” Lee said of how the idea of starting her own firm was hatched. “He said, ‘I think you should start your own law firm, and these are all the reasons why.’ He’s a litigator and he’s very persuasive, and he obviously made his case with me.”

With her husband’s encouragement as motivation, Lee then went to work on developing a business plan.

“I admit to being an obsessive planner, and I wrote a 47-page, single-spaced business plan before I even started my firm,” she said with a grin. “And now, looking back on it, we’ve basically exceeded all my projections from that original business plan. Never in my wildest dreams did I think it would go so well.”

Especially after she experienced a particularly lean first year as a sole practitioner.

“It was just me, my laptop, Westlaw, and a malpractice insurance policy,” she joked of her fledgling firm in the winter of 2021.

“On day one, I had zero clients,” Lee recalled. “Most people start when they have a book of business. But I had a zero book of business. During the first 18 months, I never worked so hard and made so little in my life. I do enterprise-level work, so it takes a long time to get enterprise clients. It wasn’t until I actually hired my first attorney, and I had two part-time staff members, that the light bulb went off for a lot of people who realized I was serious and thought, ‘She’s not backing out of this.’”

A product of Vanderbilt Law School, Lee focuses her practice on marketing law, technology law, and IP transactions and

counseling. Her legal team now includes eight attorneys, one paralegal, and five staff members who represent a wide and impressive geographic diversity – both domestically and internationally.

“Our goal has always been to make legal work easier, clearer, and more effective for the business leaders we serve and to be equally as committed to our attorneys,” Lee said last fall after her firm was named to the prestigious Chambers USA Spotlight Guide, which recognizes the nation’s most forward-thinking and client-focused small- and medium-sized law firms in the U.S.

“We believe happy attorneys do their best work,” Lee added as she continues to invest in top-tier legal talent. “That’s our magic: a team of skilled attorneys who are energized, supported, and completely invested in our clients’ success in an array of fields that includes marketing law, tech law, data privacy law, trademark law, data

security law, corporate governance, and mergers and acquisitions.”

In recent years, Lee has held an annual three-day retreat for her firm, providing members with the opportunity to plan, bond, and recharge in settings such as Montreal, San Diego, and Atlanta.

“As the leader of the firm, I think that the retreat is the most important thing I can do to build trust and to strengthen our culture,” Lee said. “It’s the one time that we can all be physically together in person, communicating what our goals are and what we want to achieve.”

She also conducts annual employee satisfaction surveys to gauge how she and the firm are measuring up.

“They rate me and the firm on 12 different aspects, and with an average rating of 9.3 on a 10-point scale, I believe the results indicate that I’m actually achieving what I set out to do when I started the firm,” Lee said of the survey, which is conducted on a double-blind basis to encourage candor and to eliminate bias.

“I’m trying to change the way people think about the legal industry, specifically how attorneys think about the legal industry, and to show that you don’t have to be stressed out and miserable trying to meet a billable-hour requirement,” Lee explained. “I want to grow the firm but only to the extent that I’m able to do it with people who feel the same way I do about the importance of having a work-life balance.”

In fact, Lee said she is firmly “committed to prioritizing mental health and wellness and providing flexibility” for members of Aspire Law.

“Unlike many traditional law firms, our employees are given the space to succeed in life first and foremost,” Lee said. “We believe that when people succeed in life, they can transform the world around them through their quality work and meaningful interpersonal relationships.” 

At one of the firm’s annual retreats in the Canadian city of Montreal, Alina and some members of the legal team at Aspire Law took time to pose for a photo.



Small wonder

As a child prodigy, a future lawyer blazed a successful path

By Tom Kirvan

Self-effacing by nature, Alina Lee is hesitant to mention that she was a child prodigy, a wunderkind who excelled academically and athletically during her formative years.

Born in Boston, Lee and her family moved to Florida when she was 9, helping accelerate her growth as one of the top young female golfers in the nation.

"I graduated from high school when I was 14, and then I played college golf at the University of Georgia (UGA), graduating from there at the age of 17," Lee said of her journey at the Southeastern Conference (SEC) school, where she earned a full academic and athletic scholarship. "I was ranked in the top 10 as a junior golfer and around the top 30 as a collegiate golfer. I was planning to become a professional golfer, but I graduated from UGA in 2008, which was during the start of the Great Recession. Because of that timing, the pro tour was really struggling, and there was basically no money in it due to corporate cutbacks."

Consequently, Lee decided to go to law school, but not before obtaining her real estate license in Florida, as well as her mortgage broker license, designations she later also earned in Georgia.

"I did that while studying for the LSAT," she said. "That was a fun year, and I enjoyed working in residential real estate before I was admitted to Vanderbilt Law School, where I graduated when I was 21. I was the youngest member of the Georgia Bar for two years before someone caught up to me."

"I kind of joke that I've lived several lives in my short lifetime," Lee said.

Lee comes by her talents quite naturally, it would seem, as her mother was a piano prodigy growing up in Taiwan.



Highly regarded attorneys as well as top-notch golfers, Alina Lee and Alex Meier share a love of the law and the links. Here, they are pictured on a recent golf trip to Ireland, where they played 11 rounds in nine days on some of the famed seaside links of the Emerald Isle.



Alina, pictured in Ireland, was a standout player at the University of Georgia, where at the age of 16 in 2007, she was co-medalist at the Lady Puerto Rico Classic, posting rounds of 72-72-73 to finish at 1-over 217. At the time, she was believed to be the youngest collegiate medalist in women's golf history.

"My mom was an amazing pianist as a young girl," Lee revealed. "In Taiwan, they have a national competition for pianists age 18 and under, and my mom won that competition when she was 12. I believe she is still the youngest winner of the National Taiwan Junior Piano Competition."

Her mother's triumph caught the eye of officials at The Juilliard School, the world-renowned performing arts conservatory in New York City.

"She got invited to attend Juilliard, but her mother would not allow her to go because she wanted to keep her in Taiwan," Lee said of the lost opportunity.

As an only child, Lee has a special bond with her parents, Jenny and Joe, living with them throughout college and law school on account of her young age. Her parents were entrepreneurs before retiring, owning and operating a number of small businesses that required demanding hours and plenty of personal sacrifices.

"When I got my first legal job in Atlanta, they helped me move here, and I was able to stay with them my first year after graduating," she said. "I paid off all my student loans in one year, and then I was able to get my own place before meeting my now-husband (attorney Alex Meier, who heads his own employment law firm) shortly thereafter."

When Lee decided to use an online dating platform in the search for "Mr. Right," she had a specific profile in mind.

"I was looking for someone who lived within two miles of me, who played golf, and who also went to graduate school," she said in defining the parameters of her search. "He was one of eight people who popped up in the search results. And this is how big of a nerd I am: I used my law firm bio photo as my dating profile photo."

The couple began dating when Lee was 23, an age she said was "too young" to be contemplating marriage. Three years later, Lee delivered a different message to Meier: "I'm ready to get married."

And then they did, spending their honeymoon in Scotland and playing multiple 18-hole rounds of golf over 14 days.

"It was an epic golf trip, and we've continued to go on epic golf trips," Lee said. Their most recent trip was to Ireland for a nine-day journey around Irish links courses.

"Alex is a very avid golfer, as are his parents," Lee noted. "His dad played college golf at the University of Illinois."

But when it comes to bragging rights, Lee generally has the upper hand.

"I beat him more than he beats me, but we're pretty close," Lee said of the husband-and-wife golf rivalry. "I play from the men's tees, which are generally in the 6,200-yard range, while he plays from the tips, which can range from 6,800 to 7,000 yards. I mostly shoot between 78 and 80, while he shoots 80 to 82. So, I think I probably win two-thirds of the time." 

Lifeline

As an organ donor, attorney gives a recipient a second chance

By Tom Kirvan

In 2021, attorney Zach Eyster became an altruistic, or non-directed, kidney donor, volunteering to donate a healthy kidney to someone with advanced kidney disease who he did not know.



Zachary "Zach" Eyster
Partner
Aspire Law

In November, Atlanta attorney Zachary "Zach" Eyster will mark a special fifth anniversary.

In terms of years, five generally ranks as a mini-milestone on the anniversary scale. But in Eyster's case, this upcoming anniversary is of consequential value that defies any sort of measurement.

In November 2021, one year removed from the COVID-19 pandemic that rocked the world, Eyster made a monumental difference in the life of a stranger from Minnesota by donating a kidney to a woman suffering from a potentially fatal form of kidney disease.

"I was a kidney 'donor' before I actually donated," Eyster said in explaining his motivation to become a literal lifesaver. "It was just one of those things I was bound to do."

"And so, when people talk about how can we get more people to donate kidneys, I'm of the belief that if you know about it and need to be convinced to do it, then it's probably not going to be your thing, and that's okay," Eyster declared. "On the other hand, if you know about it and almost from the point of knowing about it, you decide, 'I need to do this,' then it's going to be your thing."

Simple as that, according to Eyster's reasoning, which he said was reinforced after consulting with a physician bound by his medical oath.

"Frankly, I was persuaded by the math of it," Eyster said of becoming a kidney donor. "I figured that if I go in there in pristine health and a doctor who's bound by the Hippocratic Oath tells me, 'You don't need this extra kidney,' then I'll feel comfortable in donating it and giving it to someone in desperate need of it."

An avid runner since he was in high school, Eyster said he continues to run as fast as he can for a reason – to dispel the myth that a kidney donation procedure has long-term negative consequences.

"There's a bit of a perception that if you donate your kidney, you're going to be infirm and have all sorts of health issues the rest of your life," said Eyster, who has nearly a dozen marathon finishes to his credit. "Quite honestly, I forget half the time that I even did it. And I'm told that once you donate, your remaining kidney grows in size to compensate for the loss of the other kidney. My numbers would indicate that it's true."

In fact, physicians from the National Kidney Registry say that following a donation, the "lone kidney undergoes compensatory hypertrophy – physically enlarging by about 20 to 50 percent and increases its filtering capacity to take on the workload of two kidneys."

Unlike most living kidney donors, Eyster was not motivated to donate because of the need of a relative or friend. Eyster's "non-directed" donation was spurred by his desire to fulfill a noble cause.

"When I read about the number of people (90,000) on the waiting list for a kidney in the U.S., I decided it was time to see if I could help out," Eyster indicated, noting that the demand for donors far outstrips the number who plan to donate. "I wanted to give someone a much-needed second chance."

After securing the blessing of his wife, Britney, Eyster pursued the donation procedure process with a clear mind and altruistic purpose.

"I went in there on a Wednesday morning, and I was out of there in less than 24 hours," he related. "I won't

Zach and his wife, Brit, have three adopted sons he says are “the coolest kids on earth”: Clark, Malcolm, and Cyrus.



sugarcoat it – the first 48 hours are quite uncomfortable. Even though it was a laparoscopic procedure with small incisions, they pump you full of carbon dioxide and water to inflate the abdominal cavity. Once that’s flushed out, the gas irritates your collarbones. That was the most painful part for me.”

Within six weeks, Eyster returned to his regular running routine.

“And I haven’t looked back,” he declared. “I think by four months after I donated, I was back to running the splits I was used to, and I haven’t noticed any difference in my quality of life at all.

“So, when I try to encourage people that they should do this, I take a philosophical approach because I don’t believe that I can convince anyone,” Eyster reasoned. “You’re either already kind of convinced to do it or you just got switched onto it.”

Eyster, who has O negative blood, is a universal red blood cell donor. Only about 7 percent of the population has O negative blood, making it highly sought after and generally in short supply. As such, Eyster was an optimal match for an O negative patient awaiting a kidney donation.

“O negative recipients tend to wait way longer than any other kind of recipient because they can only receive from an O negative donor,” Eyster explained. “My recipient had just recently gone on the list, and she had polycystic kidney disease, and her kidneys weighed nearly eight pounds. Normally, a kidney weighs around one-third of a pound.”

Eyster said that his kidney recipient, Sandra, “is in phenomenal shape now” and has a new lease on life after undergoing the transplant in late 2021.

“She just recently posted a picture and looks great,” he said. “She’s doing amazingly well, and I must admit that I feel very good about playing a role in her life.”

A trademark attorney with Aspire Law, an Atlanta-based firm, Eyster grew up in central Pennsylvania, graduating from Messiah College before embarking on a master’s program in ethics at Villanova University.

“I was planning to go to the Wharton School at Penn to be a big shot businessman, but by 2008 those plans had changed significantly,” Eyster said in regard to the Great Recession that sent shockwaves through the global economy.

Instead, Eyster opted for a career pivot, initially teaching SAT prep courses that led to a better-paying position as an LSAT instructor after he scored exceedingly high on the law school admission exam.

“After I did very well on the LSAT, I kind of fell into law school as a way to hide from a bad economy,” Eyster said with a smile.

After considering law schools at the University of Virginia and Duke University, Eyster elected to attend Emory University

School of Law in Atlanta after it offered an attractive scholarship package.

“Emory was free, and you can’t say no to free,” Eyster surmised.

Upon graduation from law school, where he earned his juris doctor with honors and was a Robert W. Woodruff Fellow, Eyster spent the early part of his career in Big Law before transitioning into an in-house counsel position. After spending five years with Founders Legal, an IP law

firm in Atlanta, Eyster was invited earlier this year to join Aspire Law as a partner, teaming with its founder Alina Lee (see earlier story).

“When I had the chance to work with Alina, I just had to jump at the opportunity,” said Eyster. “Alina is a star who has built a team of stars at Aspire Law. She’s a remarkable attorney and, better yet, a remarkable person.”

Eyster has a strong background in all phases of trademark law, according to Lee, from IP counseling and prosecution through enforcement and litigation.

“He has significant experience representing clients in federal and state courts as well as before the USPTO and Trademark Trial and Appeal Board,” Lee indicated. “Zach is recognized for delivering efficient, cost-effective, and investment-worthy solutions tailored to each client’s needs.”

Eyster is quick to credit his longtime paralegal, Kelsey Logan, for much of his legal success. A former classmate of Eyster’s in college, Logan began her career working at tech startups in the San Francisco area before getting married and raising three children. During the depths of the pandemic, Logan reconnected with Eyster through Facebook as she expressed interest in reentering the workforce.

“I asked her to join me as a paralegal, even though she told me point-blank that ‘I don’t know how to be a paralegal.’ I said, ‘Don’t worry about that. You’ll learn fast.’ She’s among the brightest people I know, and I had no doubt we would be a dynamic team. That was six years ago, and we’ve been joined at the hip ever since,” Eyster said. “Thank goodness for it, as she is now the most talented trademark paralegal you’re ever bound to meet. She lives in Idaho, but that doesn’t matter in today’s work world.” 



An aerial photograph of Dubai, United Arab Emirates, showing the city's skyline with numerous skyscrapers, including the Burj Khalifa, and the coastline with artificial islands and a bridge. The image is used as a background for the article.

Dubai law firm capitalized on tax-enacted opportunity in the United Arab Emirates

By Tom Kirvan

Perched along the Persian Gulf, Dubai features a skyline that stands as a breathtaking testament to human ingenuity, blazing brightly with futuristic steel and stone against the desert sky.

As the most populous city in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Dubai has become a global hub for business, luxury tourism, and modern architecture over the past half-century. Located on the Persian Gulf, Dubai also is home to famous landmarks like the Burj Khalifa – the world’s tallest building at 2,717 feet high – and the Palm Jumeirah, a distinct palm tree-shaped artificial archipelago featuring high-end resorts.

Relatedly, Dubai’s rise as a global epicenter for entrepreneurship has made it a premier legal hub for business law firms handling cross-border work, including the likes of Reina Consulting FZ LLC, which provides specialized legal services in tax, corporate, and privacy law, with expertise tailored to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Established in 1981, the GCC is an economic and political alliance consisting of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.

For its GCC practice, Reina Consulting operates out of Dubai. The firm became a Primerus member in February and is part of Reina Legal, which for more than a decade has been ranked by Legal 500 among their country’s top tier law firms in the area of taxation.

Reina marked its 14th anniversary on July 1, a 2026 date that holds special significance in the mind of its founding partner Gajendra Maheshwari.

“What began with a clear vision to deliver trusted, high-quality tax and legal advisory services has grown into a firm with a strong presence across jurisdictions, industries, and service lines,” Maheshwari wrote in a LinkedIn post this summer. “This milestone would not have been possible without the unwavering trust of our clients, the support of our affiliates, and the dedication of our team... Thank you for being part of our story.

Here’s to the next chapter of growth, collaboration, and shared success.”

Maheshwari was one of two co-founders of the firm that has grown from five original members to more than 35 employees today.

“We have around 20 attorneys,” he said, noting that Reina also has “qualified chartered accountants and MBAs in our practice.”

Maheshwari, who grew up in the state of Rajasthan in northwestern India, traces his legal roots to his great-grandfather, a court master during British rule in India.

“He was not a barrister or a lawyer, but he managed the administrative affairs of the royal court,” Maheshwari indicated. “Later, my grandfather learned typing and started helping bus operators in obtaining route permits by operating out of his kiosk set up outside the regional transport office.

“Their work greatly influenced my father to become a lawyer and he practiced up and until he was 90, regularly appearing in court and arguing cases,” Maheshwari noted. “I grew up seeing him practicing, going to courts, dealing with clients.”

Educated in the city of Jodhpur, Maheshwari obtained his master’s degree in mercantile law. He also holds chartered accountant (C.A.) and cost and management accountant (C.M.A.) certifications, designations that have enabled him to advise governments, multinational corporations, and industry associations across India, the Middle East, and the Asia-Pacific region over the course of a nearly 30-year career.

“Because of my accountancy and legal background, I have been more driven towards taxation, corporate, and commercial laws,” said Maheshwari, who has also led “high-impact reforms in tax

policy” for a number of governmental entities and international agencies (e.g., World Bank, International Finance Corporation, etc.). “We saw an overseas opportunity in 2017, when international agencies like the World Bank and the IMF (International Monetary Fund) encouraged Gulf countries – particularly UAE – to consider enacting a VAT (Value Added Tax).”

The VAT was officially introduced in the UAE on January 1, 2018, implemented at a standard rate of 5 percent, according to Maheshwari. The tax was designed to diversify government revenue sources and to reduce the country’s economic dependence on oil and hydrocarbons.

“So, at that time, we saw this opportunity and expanded our jurisdiction, establishing our footprint in the UAE,” Maheshwari explained. “That was the beginning of our UAE practice. It has been nine years now, and the practice has flourished because of the introduction

of new laws and because of more and more economic activity being carried out by UAE.”

Maheshwari is one of three senior partners at the firm with each sporting a “Big Four” accounting background. He is joined in the firm’s hierarchy by Ankur Jain and Nishant Chugh.

Jain has more than 20 years of experience in tax compliance, policy advocacy, litigation, and consultancy work. He holds a C.A. certification and also is a certified privacy professional as accorded by the Data Security Council of India. In addition, he has been a sought-after speaker on VAT matters at business events in the UAE, Bahrain, Oman, and Qatar.

Chugh, a member of The Institute of Chartered Accountants of India, earned his C.A. and law degree from Delhi University, one of the premier universities in India. He has more than 20 years of experience in corporate and

international tax affairs, beginning his career with a Big Four accountancy firm and then in a senior leadership role with a multinational corporation.

He mainly looks after the firm’s direct tax practice in both the UAE and its other office, including but not limited to income tax and corporate tax alongside foreign direct investments, inbound and outbound investment strategies, cross-border taxation, tax planning, transaction structuring, international tax, and tax litigation.

The firm’s Dubai office is headed by Amarendra Mohanty, a native of India who moved to the UAE nine years ago when the VAT was enacted.

“I advise clients on tax matters,” Mohanty said of his chief responsibilities in Dubai. “I’ve worked in all the GCC countries, including Bahrain, Oman, and Saudi Arabia. It’s been an interesting experience to be living in a country that is in a

strategic location connecting the Middle East to Europe, Asia, and Africa.

“The UAE’s transition away from traditional taxation has drawn a significant increase in economic activity during my time here, particularly in technology startups and companies involved in mergers and acquisitions,” said Mohanty, who has a wife and two daughters, ages 6 and 10.

Reina Consulting bills itself as a “leading tax and legal consultancy firm delivering strategic, results-driven advisory services across the Gulf Cooperation Council.” According to Mohanty, the “Dubai-based firm combines deep technical expertise with a nuanced understanding of the region’s evolving tax and regulatory landscape to help clients navigate complexity with confidence and peace of mind.”

Associate Partner Ananya Sarkar also is well-versed in helping businesses navigate the UAE’s legal landscape, bringing more

than 12 years of experience in corporate, commercial, regulatory compliance, PPP projects, real estate, intellectual property, data privacy law, and labor and employment law.

A first-generation lawyer in her family, Sarkar was raised in Kolkata (formerly known as Calcutta) and earned a five-year integrated Bachelor’s of Arts and Bachelor of Laws degree, with honors in taxation laws, from KIIT School of Law in Bhubaneswar. She began practicing law in 2013, initially as a litigator in debt recovery matters before transitioning to the corporate sector.

She was previously associated as an in-house legal counsel with one of the leading airport operators in the country and also acted as the legal head for a well-known real estate company.

When Reina was founded., Maheshwari said he had visions that the law firm would “grow and become successful,” even

after he experienced a level of uncertainty at the onset of his career.

“When we started this in 2012, we were pretty much certain that it was going to succeed, but my transition from my hometown was much more difficult,” Maheshwari admitted. “I was coming from a very small city to a metropolis, which is the epicenter of legal work... that was very difficult, and was a real leap of faith.”

But it was one Maheshwari was willing to take due in large part to his strong accounting background and the lineage of legal professionals in his family.

“The law has driven the whole family,” said Maheshwari, whose wife and 24-year-old daughter are also attorneys. “We have more than 25 lawyers in in my grandfather’s family. It’s in our blood and our DNA now.” 



Amarendra Mohanty
Admin & Office Manager
Reina Consulting FZ LLC



Ananya Sarkar
Associate Partner
Reina Consulting FZ LLC



Ankur Jain
Senior Partner
Reina Consulting FZ LLC



Gajendra Maheshwari
Founding Partner
Reina Consulting FZ LLC



Nishant Chugh
Senior Partner
Reina Consulting FZ LLC

Noted Texas attorney made his early mark in Dallas legal circles

By Tom Kirvan

Attorney Tab Keener grew up not far from Palo Duro Canyon State Park (pictured) known as the “Grand Canyon of Texas.”



Tab H. Keener
Shareholder
Downs & Stanford, P.C.

Now in his 40th year of practicing law, Dallas attorney Tab Keener remembers well his first job after graduating in 1986 from Mississippi College School of Law, where he earned a merit scholarship and was part of a trial team that won a national title in a mock appellate court competition.

An alumnus of Southern Methodist University (SMU), Keener returned to his Texas roots for an associate’s position with the Dallas law firm of Clark, West, Keller, Butler & Ellis, a high-profile defense firm with some significant American legal history attached to it.

For openers, it was the oldest law firm in Dallas and was celebrating its centennial anniversary in 1986.

Of even greater note, the firm had produced the likes of former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark, a champion of civil rights during the 1960s and ‘70s; U.S. District Judge Harold “Barefoot” Sanders Jr., who presided over the desegregation of the Dallas school district; and U.S. Supreme Court Justice Thomas Clark, widely regarded as one of the most underrated jurists in the history of the high court.

“It was a well-respected and historically important law firm, and I was honored to become a member of it,” said Keener, who spent eight years with the firm that handled business, employment, and tort defense work. “It was a good place to start my career, as I learned a lot from the senior members and gained some courtroom experience under their guidance.”

It served as a pathway to even more trial work with Crum & Forster, a commercial insurance company where Keener spent six years as part of a two-attorney “captive counsel” team that handled

high-volume claims between the insurer and its policyholders.

“I gained a lot of trial experience on some large commercial cases and enjoyed my time there before they were purchased by a larger company,” Keener indicated. “At that point, it was a good time to move out of the captive counsel world and back into private practice where there was opportunity for career growth.”

Eventually, the decision to return to private practice would lead Keener to the Dallas firm of Downs & Stanford, P.C.

A shareholder of the firm for the past 20 years, Keener is primarily a defense litigator whose practice focuses on construction law, premises liability, wrongful death, trucking accidents, automotive defects, product liability, electric utility, and oil field accidents.

Keener, who earned a football scholarship to SMU (see related story), has also written and spoken widely on a number of legal topics, including peer-reviewed articles that appeared in the Texas Tech University and Baylor University law reviews.

“The article on premises liability that appeared in the law review for Texas Tech School of Law was cited in an opinion by the San Antonio Court of Appeals and is still featured in O’Conner’s Texas Causes of Action,” said Keener, who chairs the Primerus Transportation Committee and has been a frequent speaker at programs presented by the Primerus Defense Institute.

One of two sons, Keener grew up in Canyon, not far from Palo Duro Canyon State Park, one of the most popular sightseeing attractions in the Texas Panhandle.

“It is the second-largest canyon in the country behind the Grand Canyon,” Keener



Tab and his wife, Robin, will soon have their whole family nearby with both sons moving to the Dallas area in the near future.

indicated. “Not too many people outside of Texas know that fact.”

During high school, Keener developed an interest in drama, regularly appearing in school theatrical productions. His stage talents dovetailed neatly with a budding interest in the law, which was influenced by his future father-in-law, a successful attorney.

Keener and his wife, Robin, were college sweethearts at SMU, where she graduated with an English degree.

“We’ve been married for 44 years and she is getting ready to retire from Corient, a wealth management company,” Keener related. “She’s had a very nice career there, but retirement will allow her the opportunity to spend more time with our two sons and our two grandchildren, a 5-year-old granddaughter and a 3-year-old grandson.”

The couple’s two sons, Wil and Cole, will soon both be living in the Dallas area, according to Keener.

“Wil is in the oil and gas business and plans to move from Houston to Dallas with his family,” said Keener of his older son, who is a graduate of the University of Arkansas and played competitive golf in amateur tournaments at the national level.

The unconventional spelling of his first name is best explained by his father.

“As a lawyer, I told him you’re not a testamentary instrument – a will,” Keener declared. “You are a ‘Wil’ instead.”

Cole, who inherited his father’s interest in the stage, initially pursued a career in Hollywood before returning to Dallas to get married and work in internet marketing.

As one of the principals at Downs & Stanford, Keener has been involved in a number of noteworthy cases, including an appearance before the nine-member Texas Supreme Court to argue a high-stakes matter involving the law of personal jurisdiction as it applies to out-of-state companies doing business in Texas.

“It was special to have the opportunity to appear before the state’s highest court and to answer questions from each of the justices,” Keener said. “This may sound strange, but it was fun.”

Keener admitted to having even more “fun” when he appeared before the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit, which has jurisdiction over various district courts in Texas, Louisiana, and Mississippi.

Even though his appearance before the appellate panel in 2020 was by Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Keener said he was particularly impressed by the number of “penetrating questions” he fielded from

the three judges assigned to the case, which in its initial stages had attracted national attention.

“It was being labeled as the ‘Code Red Case’ because of the facts surrounding it,” explained Keener of the appeal that arose from a 2015 high school football game between John Jay High School in San Antonio and Marble Falls High School near Austin.

Code Red is a term that gained notoriety in the 1992 movie “A Few Good Men” and typically refers to an off-the-books disciplinary action used by military units to punish a struggling soldier.

“Near the end of the game, two players from the John Jay team blindsided one of the referees, knocking him to the ground and injuring him,” Keener said. “The incident was caught on video and went viral around the country. Within a matter of days, the video had more than 7 million views.

“The two players, who were both ejected from the game and then suspended from school, said they hit the referee on the orders of their assistant coach, who evidently was upset about a couple of calls that went against his team,” Keener indicated. “The coach, who later admitted that he ordered the ‘Code Red,’ also claimed that the ref had made some racial slurs during the game.”

Keener, by way of a referral, ended up representing the referee (Robert Watts) in a suit against the assistant coach (Mack Breed) and the school district (Northside Independent) for damages from the injuries he suffered in the incident.

“We had an admission of guilt relative to the assault, but it was found that the school district was not responsible for the actions of the coach because it could not be held liable for the unforeseeable actions of employees acting outside of school policies,” Keener indicated. “The Court of Appeals did rule in our favor

that we could proceed with the lawsuit against the coach, which we ended up settling.

“It was a pretty fascinating case in many respects, and it was especially interesting how the Court of Appeals opinion opened, which referred to the ‘Friday Night Lights’ book that was turned into a movie,” Keener remarked.

Federal Court of Appeals Judge Gregg Costa wrote: “Texas high school football has a storied history ... But what happened on the Friday night in September 2015 when Marble Falls High School played John Jay High School may have been unprecedented ...”

In legal and gridiron terms, Keener surmised.

“It was a case unlike any other I’ve handled,” he remarked. 

Dallas attorney was part of 'The Pony Express' era during glory days at SMU

By Tom Kirvan

The home of the SMU Mustangs, the Gerald J. Ford Stadium opened in 2000 and has a seating capacity of 32,000. It is named after Gerald J. Ford, a Dallas banker, investor, and SMU trustee who provided the lead donation to help fund the facility's construction.

In high school, Tab Keener was a prized recruit in the football-crazed state of Texas, where the sport is a cultural passion and gridiron stars are treated much like royalty.

As a 6-foot, 3-inch offensive lineman and linebacker with surprising speed and quickness, Keener rated as one of the top 100 players on Dave Campbell's list of blue-chip players, a recruiting ranking service that for years has been relied on heavily by college coaches and rabid fans of respective schools across the Lone Star State.

Keener's football talents were so impressive that coaches from Southern Methodist University (SMU), Texas Tech, Oklahoma State, Arizona State, and others were lining up with scholarship offers for the promising player out of Canyon, a small town that is part of the Amarillo Metropolitan area in the Panhandle of Texas.

As part of the recruiting process, Keener enjoyed his share of perks, including his first-ever plane trip, a journey west to visit the campus of Arizona State in the Phoenix suburb of Tempe. There he encountered Sun Devil head man Frank Kush, the winningest football coach in school history whose 1975 team sported a 12-0 record en route to a No. 2 ranking in the final polls.

In addition to his record of on-field success, Kush also was known for his fiery temper and no-nonsense coaching style, which Keener got a taste of during his recruiting visit.

"He was mean, plain and simple," Keener said of Kush, who several years later was dismissed from his ASU coaching post for reportedly punching a player.

With Arizona State crossed off his list of possible collegiate destinations, Keener

decided to focus his attention on in-state schools such as SMU in Dallas, which was in a rebuilding mode under the leadership of Ron Meyer, a former University of Nevada, Las Vegas head coach who was hired by the university in 1976 to revive a struggling Mustang program.

"It was really exciting to go to Dallas – the 'big city,'" Keener said of his ultimate decision to attend SMU. "When they were recruiting me, they said, 'Well, Tab, the reason we're recruiting you is that we like the way that you run and the way you move, but you're not going to play linebacker for us. You're going to be an offensive lineman.'"

What Keener didn't know at the time was that he would soon become part of one of the most storied times – good and bad – in the history of SMU football. It became known as "The Pony Express" era of Mustang football, a heyday featuring the one-two running punch of Eric Dickerson and Craig James.

The SMU duo of Dickerson and James, who were both high school All-Americans and grew up around 40 minutes from each other outside of Houston, would go on to rush for a combined 8,192 yards and 70 touchdowns from 1979-82 for the Mustangs. As seniors, they led the Mustangs to an 11-0-1 season, the Southwest Conference title, and the No. 2 ranking behind Penn State. During those years, SMU was a member of the Southwest Conference whose members included University of Texas (UT), Texas A&M University, Texas Tech University, Baylor University, University of Houston, and Texas Christian University.

The players were dubbed "The Pony Express" by the then SMU sports information director as a historical nod to the 19th century mail delivery system, coupled with the football tandem's blazing speed and flashy playing style that would



Tab Keener – pictured in the second row from the top, second from the left wearing No. 68 – was part of a 1979 SMU football team that included such future NFL players as Eric Dickerson, Craig James, Michael Carter, Harvey Armstrong, Perry Hatnett, and Robert Fisher. The '79 season marked the highly-anticipated arrival of the famed “Pony Express” backfield, featuring first year running backs Dickerson and James.



Tab Keener (No. 68) played offensive guard for the SMU Mustangs and is pictured confirming a first down in a game against the perennially powerful Texas Longhorns, then coached by Fred Akers. Keener was a two-time letterman at SMU, helping the Mustangs win the Southwest Conference championship his senior season. Banned from post-season play at the Cotton Bowl for recruiting violations, SMU did sew up the conference championship with a win over Arkansas in the regular season finale that was laughingly labeled the “Polyester Bowl.”

earn them All-America honors in college and eventually a spot in the NFL Hall of Fame for Dickerson.

During his freshman season in 1978, Keener displayed enough promise to make the traveling squad for the Mustangs, earning the right to suit up for both home and away games.

“We played Ohio State, Penn State, and University of Florida my freshman year, so it was a lot of fun and quite a thrill to go up against football powers like that,” said Keener, whose late father, John, played tight end in junior college ball. “Penn State, of course, was coached by Joe Paterno and Matt Millen was one of their defensive stars. I think they were No. 1 or No. 2 in the country at the time and we led them 14-0 at the half before they came back to win (26-21).”

But it was in pre-game warmups that Keener came face-to-face with the step up from high school to college football.

“Ron Meyer, who went on to coach in the NFL, was our coach and he looked

over at me during warmups and told me, ‘Keener, pull up your socks. This ain’t Canyon, Texas.’”

Indeed, it wasn’t, as a week later the Mustangs would travel to Columbus to take on an Ohio State team coached by the legendary Woodie Hayes, tying the Big Ten perennial power 35-35 after the SMU field goal kicker missed a potential game-winning field goal late in the contest.

During his sophomore season, Keener earned the starting nod at offensive guard for the game against UT at the Dallas Cowboys’ Texas Stadium, blocking for the freshmen running tandem of Dickerson and James.

In 1981, the Mustangs roared to a 10-1 record, claiming the Southwest Conference crown and a top five ranking in one poll and a lofty national champion mark in other polls, as SMU became the toast of Dallas, regularly selling out games at Texas Stadium.

“We played there for a number of years before a new on-campus stadium was

built,” said Keener of the change in football venue. “When I was a freshman, our games were at the Cotton Bowl.”

All the wins, however, would eventually exact a heavy cost for the SMU football program, as the NCAA handed down a “death penalty” ruling in 1987 for a series of recruiting infractions spanning a number of seasons. Wealthy boosters, it was discovered, got caught up in a payment scheme designed to lure top players like Dickerson and James to the SMU program. Evidently, the modern-day version of “The Pony Express” was loaded with money bags.

Now, in the current landscape of college athletics, such payments ironically would be permitted under the guise of NIL (Name, Image, and Likeness), according to attorney Keener, a longtime partner in the Dallas law firm of Downs & Stanford, P.C.

“My oldest son recently said to me, ‘Well, Dad, SMU knows those (NIL) roads. They paved them.’” 

Cleveland attorney masters the art of ‘negotiation’

By Tom Kirvan

Ronni Garofoli is the second oldest of four children raised by her parents, Mary and Tony. Her mother worked for years in early childhood education before retiring, while her father is the executive director of internal audit for the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority. Her siblings include Nicole (Nicki), Augusta (Augie), and Anthony.



Veronica "Ronni" Garofoli
Partner
Schneider Bell

Over the course of her 11 years in private practice, Cleveland attorney Veronica "Ronni" Garofoli has been involved in more than her share of difficult negotiations in the fields of probate and trust litigation, including a high-stakes matter in which she successfully argued a motion to dismiss the key claim.

More about that case later.

But even considering the challenges posed in such nettlesome cases, Garofoli readily acknowledged that "one of the most impressive negotiations I've had to make" was far removed from her daily legal duties at the Cleveland law firm of Schneider Bell, a Primerus member since 2005.

Instead, her challenge came in the sometimes turbulent field of "domestic relations," an arena where tranquility and happiness can be elusive concepts.

After graduating from Elmhurst University located just west of Chicago, the Cleveland native longed to return to her Ohio roots for law school, a challenging three-year academic journey that she preferred to experience with the nearby support of her tight-knit Italian family.

Back then, Garofoli's life was enriched by the presence of her boyfriend, Danny Bosco, a Chicago native with strong family ties to the Windy City and its assorted sports teams. Convincing him to leave behind his Chicago roots and to start a new life 350 miles away was the ultimate "tough sell," according to Garofoli.

"He had everything in Chicago that I have here in Cleveland – a wonderful family, childhood friends, connections, memories, and favorite sports teams," said Garofoli of the dilemma her now-husband faced. "He didn't know anyone here but me and my family, but he planted his own seeds the

way he does everything, quietly, loyally, and without expecting anything being handed to him."

Once the couple decided to marry, then Part II in the negotiations began as they considered whether Garofoli should keep her maiden name.

"That was apparently another masterclass in negotiation," Garofoli said with a grin. "Do I keep my Garofoli name with all its Cleveland ties, which could mean a lot professionally, or do I take Danny's last name and honor tradition? Obviously, you know how that turned out."

Still, Part II might turn out to be a split decision, Garofoli admitted.

"We have two little girls now who are approaching kindergarten and preschool ages, so I'm sure I'll be 'Mrs. Bosco' before I know it," she said with a chuckle.

The Garofoli name has long held a certain aura in Cleveland legal circles. Her late grandfather, Anthony J. Garofoli, was a name partner in a well-known law firm that he co-founded.

"In addition to being a highly respected trial attorney in Cleveland, my grandfather was also an important political figure here. He, at one time, was chairman of the local Democratic Party, served as president of the Cleveland City Council, and even ran for mayor. On top of all that and more, he was just the best grandfather ever. And now, I have the privilege of sharing his last name and hearing inspiring stories from people who knew him."

Her grandfather's influence proved to be a factor when Garofoli began thinking about possible careers to pursue as she entered college.

"I became much more inquisitive about his career after he passed," Garofoli said



In a keepsake family photo are Ronni and her husband, Danny Bosco, who works in a key role with Howard Hanna Mortgage Services, and their two children, Domenica (Domi) and Santina (Sonni).

of her grandfather, who died in 2003 at the age of 66. “People who knew him knew his love for family, a full table, good food, and humor that could carry a room. To his community, he was trusted and genuinely kind. He left a legacy that his family will always carry with pride.”

One of four children, Garofoli attended Beaumont School, an all-girls Catholic high school in the Ursuline tradition. There, she played basketball, lacrosse, and soccer.

“I played a lot of sports, and I thought I was on my way to the WNBA, which was optimistic at 5-foot, 1-inch tall,” she said with a smile. “I was a point guard and played as a freshman at Elmhurst,

although my shots did get blocked often. Very often.”

Any aspirations about a possible career in pro ball evaporated after her freshman season, prompting Garofoli to focus her energies on the academic side of college. Her interest in the legal profession was piqued even further by working for a sole practitioner in Chicago, a job that exposed her “to the ins and outs of running” a small law office.

When she returned to Ohio to attend Cleveland State University College of Law, where her grandfather had been inducted into its Hall of Fame, Garofoli landed her first job following graduation in 2015 thanks largely to attorney Charles T.

Brown, the former chief magistrate at the probate court in Cuyahoga County.

“He retired from the court after more than 25 years of service and went into private practice as a second career in the law,” explained Garofoli, whose father attended the same high school (St. Ignatius) and college (John Carroll University) as Brown. “He asked if I was interested in joining him at Mansour Gavin, a full-service firm in Cleveland. I was lucky to start my career with a front row seat watching him apply his judicial experience to the world of private practice, teaching and coaching me along the way.

“He was incredibly generous with his time and sharing his knowledge, allowing me to take on assignments and tasks that were challenging. I probably wasn’t ready for them at the time, but he believed in me and mentored me. I worked with him for the first six years of my career before I moved to Schneider Bell.”

The move to Schneider Bell in 2021 was precipitated by Garofoli’s need to strike a better work-life balance as the mother of two infant daughters, both of whom were born during the elongated COVID-19 pandemic.

“I needed a hybrid opportunity; I needed flexibility with an infant and another baby on the way,” Garofoli explained. “I really believed I could do both. Show up fully for work, hit the billable hours, carry the responsibility. But I also wasn’t willing to miss the moments that mattered at home. And the older I get, the more I realize it was never just about COVID or finding a better work-life balance. It was about creating a life that aligned with who I am, instead of reshaping myself to fit someone else’s version of success.”

Fortunately, her desires meshed with the needs and culture of Schneider Bell.



Anthony J. Garofoli, Ronni’s late grandfather, was a central figure in the Cleveland political and legal communities.

“One of the clear reasons I wanted to work here is the culture. David Lenz, our managing partner, leads with trust and that culture trickles down,” said Garofoli. “From day one, I felt trusted and supported to build something there that was both ambitious and sustainable. And honestly, that mutual trust is a big part of why I’ve been able to grow into the lawyer and person I wanted to become.”

In December 2024, that faith was fulfilled when Garofoli became a partner in the firm that now numbers more than 30 attorneys.

Garofoli focuses her practice in the areas of probate and trust litigation, probate and trust administration, and estate planning. She provides representation to clients in all aspects of probate, trust, and estate disputes.

One such case was that “high-stakes matter” mentioned at the start of this story. In that 2025 dispute, Garofoli represented a fiduciary responsible for administering a more than \$10 million estate and trust.

“As a fiduciary, my client was trying to fulfill her duties responsibly while navigating claims from people who believed they should have been beneficiaries and claimed that my client had somehow breached her duties in the process,” Garofoli indicated. “Layered onto that were various charitable beneficiaries with claims, which brought the Ohio Attorney General into the matter, making it a particularly complex and closely watched dispute.”

And to make matters even more interesting, Garofoli’s opposing counsel in the case cast a familiar presence.

“Charles T. Brown, my mentor and former colleague, now turned adversary,” Garofoli said of the attorney she faced.

Brown, as it turned out, was sure to have been impressed with the work of his former protégé, as Garofoli successfully argued a motion to dismiss, setting the stage for the settlement of assorted other claims.

“It’s just like poetry the way it all worked out,” said Garofoli, who even drew praise in Crain’s Cleveland Business for the legal skill she displayed in the case. “The case ultimately settled, so it never really became a story about winners and losers. What meant the most to me was that after it was over, we met for lunch and continued the mentorship and relationship beyond the courtroom. To me, that says everything about the kind of lawyer and person that he is, and the kind I strive to be.” 



Miami law firm focuses on bringing long-term value to the community

By Brian Cox

The Miami community benefits from the expertise and care Trembly Law Firm brings to serving its clients.

Trembly Law Firm understands where its clients are coming from, principally because the firm has never lost touch with its entrepreneurial roots.

For the attorneys at the Miami-based firm, representing business owners isn't just a matter of legal experience. It's personal.

Many of the firm's lawyers grew up in families that built businesses from the ground up. They watched parents and grandparents work long hours, worry over payroll, make difficult decisions,

and shoulder the risks that come with entrepreneurship. Those experiences have shaped the firm's culture, creating lawyers who understand not only the legal challenges their clients face but also the emotional and financial weight of running a business.

Helping businesses grow by preventing problems whenever possible, rather than simply profiting from litigation after problems arise, is the foundation of Trembly Law Firm's philosophy.

It is a mindset reflected in everything from the firm's General Counsel Program to its educational resources for business owners. It also explains why partners Christian Rodriguez and Arturo Arca speak about clients less as cases and more as long-term relationships.

"We're not here to compete with other firms," Arca said. "Our focus has really been two main things: our firm's culture and what new and innovative ways we can bring value to the business community."

The two attorneys can point to their own stories as sources for the firm's approach to client relations.

For Arca, the journey started thousands of miles away in Los Angeles, where he was born to Cuban parents before the family relocated to Miami.

The move promised opportunity but also brought unexpected hardship. His parents found themselves without work, financial pressures mounted, and everyone in the household had to contribute. Arca began working when he was just 14 years old, taking whatever jobs he could to help support the family.

Those experiences left a lasting impression. As Arca saw things, there were two options: You could have the financial resources to hire people to protect you

and take care of situations when they arose, or you could be that person.

"I didn't come from a family with resources," he said. "So, I became that person. I became a lawyer."

The experience also shaped the empathy he brings to clients today.

"I saw what the lack of resources does to a person, to a family, and the challenges they face as a result of that," he said, adding that Trembly Law attorneys remain mindful that not every business owner has unlimited resources.

Rodriguez's story shared many of the same themes.

A Miami native and the oldest of four children, Rodriguez grew up in a family of Cuban immigrants who viewed

entrepreneurship as a path toward creating better opportunities for future generations.

His grandparents started businesses, and his parents made sacrifices to provide opportunities for their children. Like Arca, Rodriguez went to work while still a teenager, helping in family businesses and learning firsthand what it took to keep them operating.

As a student, Rodriguez imagined becoming a physician like his parents. He explored majors ranging from pre-med to vocal performance before eventually taking a psychology course that changed everything.

"The professor was both a Ph.D. in psychology and a juris doctor," Rodriguez recalled. "The first day, he comes in and

goes, 'Who can tell me what the law is about?'"

The professor provided a straightforward answer: "The law is about resolving disputes."

The idea reframed the profession in a way that immediately resonated with Rodriguez, who decided to pursue law.

He graduated from law school in 2009 near the top of his class, only to enter one of the worst legal job markets in recent memory during the financial crisis.

Despite graduating seventh in his class and serving as executive editor of the law review, Rodriguez found that interviews were scarce. He accepted a series of difficult positions, including one paying just \$10 an hour at his law school after

leaving what he describes as a toxic work environment.

Looking back, Rodriguez saw those setbacks differently than he did at the time.

The experience humbled him, exposed him to a remarkable variety of litigation, and showed him the importance of strong mentorship and a healthy workplace culture.

"I realized that you are not entitled to diddly-squat," he said. "You've got to work for everything."

When Rodriguez joined Trembly Law Firm, it was still relatively small. He became only its second attorney, working long days while helping founder Brett Trembly build the practice.

"I wanted a place that had potential to grow," Rodriguez said.

Over the years, he, Arca, and the rest of the leadership team helped transform that vision into a growing business law firm while remaining mindful that, in many ways, they still face the same challenges as the clients they advise.

"We're still a small business ourselves for all intents and purposes," Rodriguez said. "We have the same struggles and the same fears and concerns that every other small business owner does."

Rather than merely reacting to legal disputes, Trembly Law encourages business owners to think proactively. Its attorneys frequently compare legal planning to preventive medicine: addressing issues before they become expensive lawsuits.

The attorneys of Trembly Law Firm make representing entrepreneurs about more than just sharing legal advice.



Palm trees and Miami are an inseparable pair, serving as the ultimate symbol of the city's sun-soaked, tropical identity.



Christian E. Rodriguez
Managing Partner
Trembly Law Firm



Arturo L. Arca
Partner
Trembly Law Firm

The firm's educational initiatives reflect that philosophy.

Its "Danger Zone" book explains common legal pitfalls in straightforward language rather than legal jargon. The firm also developed a "Danger Zone" certification process and a General Counsel Program designed to make attorneys accessible before legal crises emerge.

For Arca, the General Counsel Program is fundamentally about relationships.

"When a client signs up for the General Counsel Program, they basically have a lawyer on speed dial," he said.

Clients know who to call when questions arise, whether they involve contracts, business strategy, or unexpected regulatory issues.

By addressing problems early, businesses often avoid the far greater costs of litigation, according to Rodriguez. He pointed to employment law as one example.

Many small business owners unknowingly create legal exposure through routine workplace practices involving wage classifications, overtime, or employee policies.

"The cost of the preventive measures is significantly less than the litigation," he explained.

He recalls representing one client through multiple lawsuits before finally taking a discrimination case to trial and winning.

After closing arguments, Rodriguez searched the courthouse looking for his client.

He eventually found him alone in a stairwell.

"I didn't realize how stressful this was going to be," the client told him. "I didn't realize how terrible this was going to be."

For Rodriguez, the moment reinforced exactly why preventive legal counseling matters.

"It's not because I'm afraid of trials," he said. "That's why we created this program. Even if we only reach one or two businesses, that's already one or two businesses that we've helped."

Encouraging business owners to change their mindset about when they need legal assistance has become part of the firm's mission through speaking engagements, podcasts, articles, and community outreach.

The firm's approach extends beyond client service into its own internal culture.

As Trembly Law Firm has grown and its profile has matured, its attorneys have remained committed to mentoring younger lawyers and paralegals, allowing the firm to continue serving emerging businesses while simultaneously expanding into larger middle-market and international clients.

"We invest so much time into our culture," Arca said. "There's no pride amongst us. The way it works and why it works is because we hone in on everybody's strength."

The firm's collaborative environment has translated into remarkable employee retention and, ultimately, stronger client relationships.

"We genuinely care about our clients," Arca said. "We want to see them grow because when they grow, it's a win-win situation for everybody." 

Onward and upward

Argentine law firm carries on legacy of its co-founder

By Brian Cox

Attorney Mariano Carricart appreciates the opportunity he and his partners were given early in their careers to help guide Badeni, Cantilo, Carricart & Bilbao to where it is today.



Mariano E. Carricart
Partner
Badeni, Cantilo, Carricart & Bilbao

Gregorio Badeni. It is a name recognized and respected throughout the Argentine legal community.

A prominent attorney, university professor, and leading expert in constitutional law, Badeni was known for his extensive academic work and his role in major institutional lawsuits.

He also co-founded the prestigious Buenos Aires law firm now known as Badeni, Cantilo, Carricart & Bilbao.

“He was one of the most well-known constitutional attorneys in Argentina,” said Mariano Carricart, a partner in the firm. “He was very generous and very open-minded. It was really a pleasure working with him.”

Badeni died in 2020 at the age of 77, but the firm carries on his legacy by advising clients on complex local and international business transactions and taking part in lawsuits of great institutional and legal significance.

Balancing between honoring a distinguished legal tradition and adapting to a changing marketplace has become a defining characteristic of Badeni, Cantilo, Carricart & Bilbao.

Founded in 1973 under the leadership of Badeni and another prominent attorney, Segundo Víctor Linares Quintana, the firm earned its reputation through constitutional and administrative law, handling matters that shaped legal scholarship and public institutions in Argentina. Over the past decade, it has broadened that foundation into a full-service practice with a growing emphasis on corporate law, mergers and acquisitions, cross-border transactions, and the day-to-day legal needs of international companies doing business in Argentina.



Attorney Mariano Carricart describes his family farm, “La Perseverancia,” as his favorite place on earth. The 120-hectare farm is less than a two-hour drive from Buenos Aires.

Carricart has been central to that evolution.

Born and raised in Buenos Aires, Carricart comes from a family of lawyers. His father practiced law, as did his uncle, making the profession a familiar path even before he entered law school at the Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina. Still, his own career would ultimately take a different direction from his father’s.

“My father still works. He’s 83,” Carricart said. “We have two different law firms. I decided to start my own career as a

lawyer, and then the path guided me to other places. My father is a traditional attorney. He works in a small firm, and I wanted to work in bigger firms and do more international work.”

After graduating from law school in 1996, Carricart gained experience in a civil court before joining his father’s practice for a year. He soon moved into larger firms where he focused on corporate law, capital markets, and cross-border transactions. Seeking to deepen that experience, he earned a master’s degree in international

commercial law at the University of Nottingham in England.

When he returned to Argentina, Carricart resumed his corporate practice, but another opportunity soon emerged. After years of practicing alongside Alfredo Cantilo, the two lawyers decided it was time to leave their previous firm and find a new home where they could continue building an international corporate practice together.

That search led them to Gregorio Badeni.

At the time, Badeni’s firm was widely recognized for constitutional and administrative law but did little private corporate work. Carricart and Cantilo saw an opportunity to complement the firm’s established strengths.

Badeni gave the incoming lawyers room to grow.

“This is your firm; this is your house,” Carricart recalled Badeni telling them. “Feel free to practice the law as much as you can.”

The arrangement proved mutually beneficial. While Badeni continued to lead the firm’s constitutional practice, Carricart and his colleagues developed its corporate capabilities, representing foreign companies entering the Argentine market and advising clients on contracts, mergers and acquisitions, financing, employment issues, and commercial disputes.

The transition was not without risk. Leaving an established practice always raises questions about whether clients will follow and whether a new venture will succeed. Carricart described the decision as challenging but also consistent with an entrepreneurial mindset he and his partners had already developed.



Mariano enjoys horseback riding at his farm, where he spends as much time as possible with friends and family. The working farm also has chickens and grows wheat, corn, and soybeans.

“You never know until you make the decision,” Carricart said.

The gamble paid off.

Since Carricart joined the firm in 2012, it has grown from roughly 11 lawyers to approximately 30. By Argentine standards, he described it as a medium-sized firm, but one with an international outlook. Most of its attorneys are bilingual, and the firm’s client base extends well beyond Argentina to companies from the United States, Europe, and Asia seeking legal guidance as they establish or expand operations in the South American country.

Throughout Carricart’s career, he has focused on helping overseas clients navigate Argentina’s legal and regulatory environment, translating not only language but also business expectations across jurisdictions.

His work has also extended beyond private practice. Carricart has contributed to the World Bank and International Finance Corporation’s Doing Business project, published articles in legal journals, and remained active in professional organizations, including the International Bar Association.

A longtime member of Primerus, the firm has developed professional friendships and referral relationships that complement its cross-border practice while reinforcing its reputation among lawyers around the world.

Although the firm’s practice has broadened considerably, its constitutional roots remain an important part of its identity. Cases handled by the firm have reached Argentina’s Supreme Court and become subjects of study at the country’s leading law schools. At the

same time, its lawyers continue to guide businesses through an increasingly global marketplace, offering practical advice grounded in decades of experience.

More than a decade after he walked through Badeni’s doors, Carricart still speaks with appreciation about the opportunity he and his partners were given to help shape the firm’s future. That combination of legal heritage, entrepreneurial spirit, and international perspective has enabled the firm to evolve while remaining true to the standards established by its founders.

“We’re good at what we do, and we’re competitive,” said Carricart, adding with a smile, “And we’re really happy.” 

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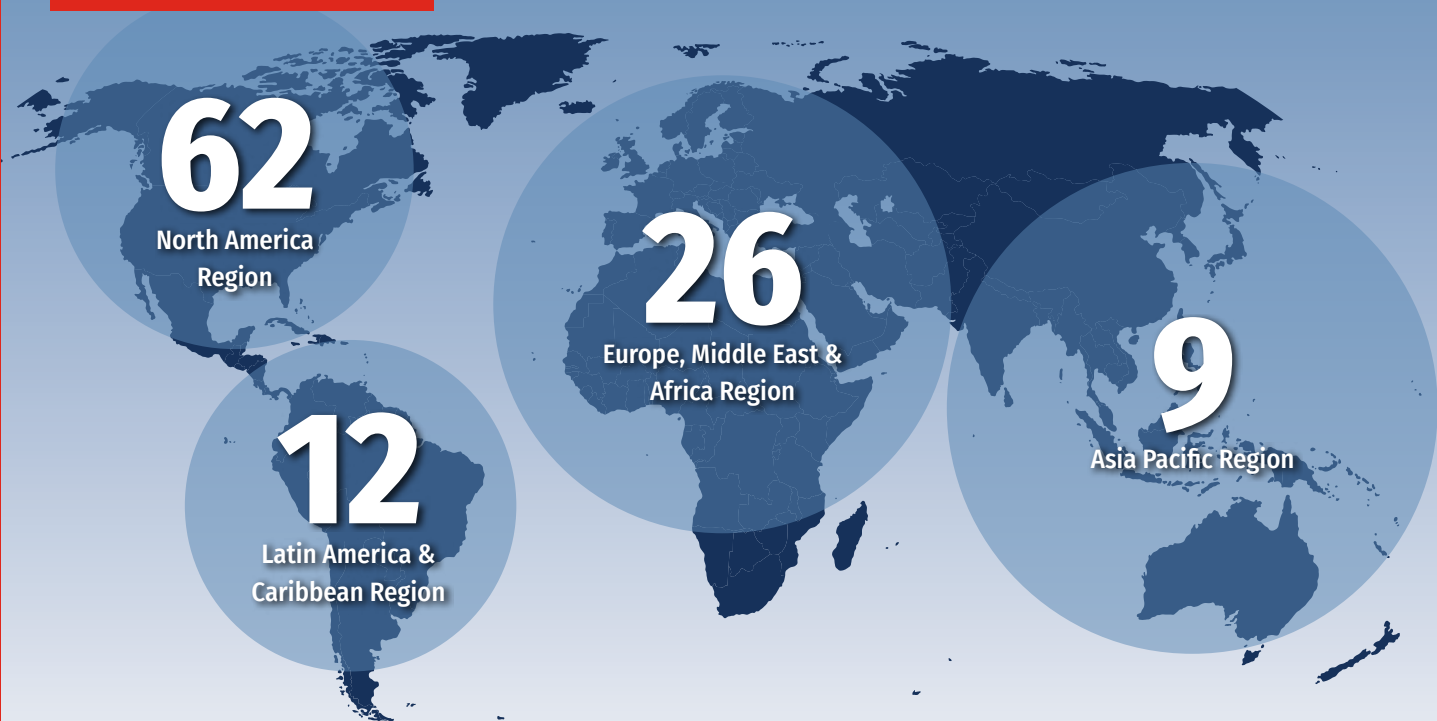
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