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Partnerships That Really Work

Tim Reuland & Bob Speers: Longevity Cultured at Home, Work

Publisher's Note – This is the first of what will be an annual Law Day column recognizing law partnerships that are unique due to the length of time they have endured and the special relationship that exists between the business partners – as judged by their peers. I try hard to be positive, professional and friendly (it's a Minnesota Nice thing!), and I respect and appreciate many of the Leading Lawyers I am fortunate to know, who go out of their way to do likewise. In an effort to help promote civility, professionalism and camaraderie in the best tradition of two guys who did a great deal to help me and Leading Lawyers – Mike Coffield and Don Hubert – this column and I hope other efforts to come will do our little part to promote the best traditions of the bar. As you read this year's example, I think you will see this is indeed a unique law partnership that extends beyond the office and which is well known by their many peers who have deep respect and admiration for both of these gentlemen. Scott C. Anderson, Publisher, Leading Lawyers

By Chris Bailey

AURORA — Bob Speers and Tim Reuland look across the table at each other in silence, practically begging the other to go first.

Their partnership in Speers, Reuland & Cibulskis PC, and their marriages to Mary and Kate, respectively, have all lasted nearly four decades. That might be the equivalent of a multi-course meal accompanied by a bottle of fine wine and a delectable dessert in an era of drive-thru marriages and career paths.

But asking them to explain what has held them together over such a long time left them momentarily out of their com-



fort zone. They reverted to form quickly, soon bouncing thoughts and ideas back and forth across the room, much as they do with the complex personal injury, commercial law and mediation/arbitration cases on which their practice is focused.

“We’re both motivated by doing a good job,” says Speers, pausing to choose his words carefully. “Although I’ll admit I’m more motivated by the ‘agony of defeat’ than the ‘thrill of victory.’ And Tim has always made a better mentor than I am.”

“We both value quality work,” says Reuland, echoing his partner and then lapsing into quiet. After a moment, though, he expands on his initial offering with a bit more detail.

“Bob is a little steadier than I am in business matters, in financial conservatism. He

has an extraordinary ability to find what’s most important in a case. And while he says he’s not a great mentor, he still communicates his values. He especially teaches young attorneys how to avoid spending time going down blind alleys.”

Those observations seem to open the gates.

“Tim’s more a Type A,” says Speers. “I’m less that way, a little more laid back. He was No. 1 in his class at Marmion, does a lot of community service. He was the big achiever. I’m more of a slacker on some fronts, was crazier in college. But two heads are better than one. That’s no joke.”

“I’d say slacker is the wrong word,” says Reuland, now warming to the discussion. “I would say the apparent intensity with which we approach work is different.

The results are the same, though. Our differences are additive, not competitive.”

All that adds up to the culture they have created and nurtured within their firm, which includes Julie Cibulskis, Keith Johnson and Kirsten Casas.

“The culture here is excellence of work,” says Reuland, “and respect for co-workers, if not affection.”

“Respect dominates this office,” says Julie Cibulskis, who clerked for the firm in 1997 and joined it immediately after graduation from law school a year later. “It’s a collegial environment from top to bottom.

“Egos are checked at the door,” she says. “The respect between the two of them rubs off on everyone in the office.” That respect comes partly, she says, because both “recognize what they are good at and what they are not.”

A Question of Balance

Cibulskis says Reuland and Speers also have created a culture in which a driving value is balance between personal and professional lives.

“When I came in, they sat me down and made sure I understood that community service and having a family were not just allowed, but encouraged,” says Cibulskis.

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And those family values are lived out at the firm, too.

“Not only does Kate bring in her famous pumpkin cake along with a thank you message every Thanksgiving, but Tim once sat us down together and then proceeded to tell us the strengths he thought we had for which he was thankful.

“I’ve only worked in this office, but I know from colleagues that they don’t share my experience,” says Cibulskis, adding she has no plans to move on. “I am where I am today, dare I say both personally and professionally, because of Bob and Tim.”

Keith Johnson took a longer route to the firm, having spent five years as a Kane County assistant state’s attorney and another six or so in insurance defense work. But he is no less thrilled at landing there, and for some of the same reasons.

“Bob and Tim are both outstanding attorneys, but they may be even better people,” says Johnson. He clearly recalls that in his first trial in insurance defense, his opponent was Speers. Even more clearly, Johnson recalls the respect with which Speers treated him.

He crossed paths in opposition to both Speers and Cibulskis more than once and “was impressed at both their level of skill and their dealings on a human level.”

Maybe it was no surprise, then, that Johnson, saying

he’d been “ground up” by the relentless insurance defense work, later asked Speers for career advice. Johnson says Speers told him “to hang in there,” but Speers called a few months later during a firm reorganization, offered him a job and the move was made.

It didn’t take him long to learn what Cibulskis already knew—that intellectually and personally, his new home was a great place to work.

“Many law firms have the pressure of working long hours to fill an expected quota of billable hours,” says Johnson. “Here, we are encouraged to be involved in the community, and we are encouraged to take time off because they believe you need it to recharge, to be creative when you are in the office.”

He calls his current environment “collaborative,” rather than the “collegial” term Cibulskis chooses. And where Reuland and Speers call sharing their thoughts “bouncing ideas back and forth,” Johnson calls it “round-tableing,” often in a setting as informal as the office kitchen. Different word choices, maybe, but a unified approach and purpose nonetheless.

Compassion, Respect

“Bob and Tim are kind and compassionate,” says Johnson. “That makes them particularly suited, I think, to injury cases. They are zealous advocates for their clients but never anything but civil and respectful in their dealings with others. I look at them as my mentors.”

That culture of excellence of work and respect for colleagues was formed in their earliest years in the law. Reuland and Speers first met as clerks at the venerable, demanding and highly competitive Reid, Ochenschlager, Murphy & Hupp law firm in Aurora. They joined the firm they credit with launching their careers shortly after each graduated from law school, Reuland from Northwestern University and Speers from the University of Illinois.

“We spent our first two years together in the firm’s law library because we didn’t get offices,” says Reuland, laughing at the memory.

“But they were leaders in their areas when we arrived,” says Speers. “They taught us how to do good work. That helped us develop good reputations. And those reputations helped us get work.”

They left the firm several years later, starting their own law firm along with George Lindner in 1979, and have been partners both personally and professionally since.

Asked how such longevity was nurtured, Speers breaks into a big smile and offers an opinion that has nothing to do with the law.

“Maybe it’s because we’re both still on Wife No. 1,” he says.

Indeed, they seem to have discovered that two families might be better than one. Mary Speers and Kate Reuland met through their hus-

bands, who were their boy-friends at the time. They are as close as their husbands, both literally and figuratively. They live a block or so apart in Aurora, and their five kids—all born between 1978 and 1983—are more like siblings or cousins than neighbors.

“Even though they went to different schools, every summer they would revert back to living in both houses,” Mary Speers says of her sons, Dan and Doug, and the Reuland children, John, Meg and Tom.

The couples even took a celebratory French barge trip together in 2002 to celebrate when all their young had flown the nest of high school. But they, like many other parents, soon discovered the chicks don’t always leave the nest permanently on their first flight.

“It turned out to be a little premature,” she says, laughing. “I think they all rolled through home again.” They enjoyed the trip together nonetheless.

“We all met through the work thing originally, but over the years, we’ve become great friends,” says Mary Speers. “It is unusual that partners work so well together, but they really are not jealous of or competitive with each other. So often little things can destroy a friendship. In the places I’ve worked, it’s often the little things that get to people. But they applaud each other’s successes.”

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Core Differences Add Strength

One attribute they share, according to Kate Reuland, is that both of them like the law. "They see it as a worthy profession. Their respect for it and their role in it animates them. And I know Tim really enjoys bouncing things off Bob."

"Bob is pretty laid back," says Mary Speers, trying to identify some of the differences between the pair. "He kind of relieves the tension. Tim is more serious."

Another major difference between them is one of religion. Tim Reuland is a practicing Catholic while Bob Speers defines himself as a non-believer or agnostic.

"Religion is a good example of how they can, at their core, feel very differently about something and still work their way around it," says Mary Speers.

Kate Reuland suggests that their differences—even the big ones—might actually be part of what holds them together.

"Their differences provide opportunity for discussions of issues important to both of them," she says. "They are both curious intellectually. The four of us have had numerous discussions regarding religion and politics and other topics that in other company would be out of bounds."

Pausing, she takes her thought one step further.

"Tim and Bob would be a good model for what public discourse could be."

There seems little doubt, either, that the family relationships have only served to support the professional one, and that the family relationships have been as carefully nurtured as the professional.

"It's a casual, easy relationship," says Kate Reuland. "I consider it a gift in our lives. It provides balance. All are happy if life is in sync."

"We are determined that we know we're important to each other," says Mary Speers.

Retired Kane County Judge Don Fabian has known both families for years and also encouraged Keith Johnson to make the move to join the firm.

"Their social relationship extends well beyond the professional," he says. "That's not always the case with people who work together. But they are such good friends that it makes the business part that much easier for them."

"They are two of Kane County's best lawyers, hands down," says Fabian, who left the bench five years ago. "Their skills compliment each other. They each handle their own cases, but that mix allows them to bounce things off each other before an issue gets to case level."

No Alpha Dog Here

How do they work so well together?

"The perception from outside looking in is that neither has a large ego, or if they do, they check it at the door," says Fabian. "I don't think that firm has an Alpha Dog; everyone is considered to be at the same level. And the Alpha Dog scenario is far more typical."

He says he suspects Reuland takes care of details around the office that Speers doesn't want to do, while Speers can be a tension-relieving jokester.

"I've heard stories that he liked to schedule depositions on Halloween so he could wear a costume," say Fabian.

Former Kane County Judge Pam Jensen says she believes the personal and professional are melded in Reuland and Speers.

"They are part of a team in their marriages as well as their profession," says Jensen, who left the bench 12 years ago and knows both families well. "They are willing to wed extreme success with a measure of humility and respect in both areas. Most statistics would go against the success they've had in terms of relationships."

That's not to say she didn't appreciate them for other reasons.

"They are both unbelievably well prepared," says Jensen. "As a judge, you appreciate that. Both love to try cases. They both care a lot about people, and their approach in their practice serves that commitment."

They do have their differences, though, according to Jensen's husband, Wayne, an attorney who says Reuland and Speers are "two of the greatest guys I ever practiced law with."

"Tim is quieter, really smart, but with a great sense of humor," says Wayne Jensen. "Speersy is more rough and tumble. A great guy, but you wouldn't want to get in a fight with him."

To what does he attribute their longevity as partners?

"It's easy if you are with someone you trust," he says.

DuPage County Judge Ron Sutter doesn't necessarily agree that it's all that easy.

"It's hard for partnerships to last that long, especially one the size of their firm," says Sutter. "They've been together a long, long time. I've been an adversary with both of them on many occasions. They are great people with somewhat laid-back personalities. They are calm, analytical people who think things through. If they have huge egos, you certainly don't see them."

But then he chuckles and adds another potential source of their longevity as partners.

"Maybe the key to the whole thing is that they are equal golfers," he says, pausing. "Equally average."