



Jeff Rock

Successful Peoria Litigator Proves Nice Guys Do Finish First

by Chris Bailey

PEORIA—His grandmother and a fictional TV lawyer who always won his cases within a one-hour time slot might have pushed him into the law.

Or so it seems to Jeffrey B. Rock after 37 years in practice, the last 23 of them at **Hasselberg, Rock, Bell & Kuppler** of Peoria, a firm founded by his late brother and Eric Hasselberg.

“I think watching ‘Perry Mason’ with my grandmother might have done it,” says Rock, smiling at the memory of those long-ago nights in front of the television.

Raised in Princeville, a small town of about 1,200 people, he moved to Peoria when he was 10. His father hauled quarry rock before switching into real estate. Rock was encouraged to follow his own path.

“My parents said, ‘Do what you want to do,’” says Rock. “It was a pretty wild idea I had, to go to college and then to law school. No one in my family had gone past high school.”

Off he went to the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana. He majored in psychology and finance, graduating in 1974. Three years later he graduated from the Washington

University School of Law in St. Louis.

He clerked in Peoria, including at Swain, Johnson, Gard, where he was hired after graduation and worked three years in banking, collections and workers’ compensation.

He was recruited away by a small personal injury litigation law firm, Harvey & Stuckel. He worked there for a decade, most of it as a partner, before joining his brother, who was putting together a firm.

“My brother Chuck was a sole practitioner,” says Rock. “He and Hasselberg thought of it, and I joined them in 1991.”

Though his brother has since died, a Rock still walks the halls of the firm his brother co-founded.

Rock has been admitted to practice before the Supreme Court of Illinois, federal courts and the U.S. Supreme Court. He is a member of the American, Illinois and Peoria County bar associations as well as the Alternative Dispute Resolution Section of the American Bar Association.

Rock’s area of concentration is litigation and commercial law, but he says more and more

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time of late has been spent on probate litigation.

“The last five or six years, probate has heated up,” he says. That could be because of the recent recession, but most certainly it also follows the heating up of the agricultural real state market.

“I think it is being driven by farm prices,” says Rock. “Today, 150 acres equals \$1.5 million. That’s a lot of motivation.”

Photo Album Provides Proof

That monetary motivation results in two main accusations from parties unhappy either with their part of a will or with being cut out of a will entirely: undue influence and questions about the capacity to make a will.

Two indicators tend to presage a legal fight over a will, says Rock.

“A parent will be spirited away from their regular attorney,” says Rock. “And someone will start seeking detailed medical records in anticipation of making a capacity argument.

“The charge of undue influence is often used by someone cut out of a will,” says Rock. “And they’ll often argue that one sibling influenced Mom or Dad against another.”

Often, one of the children has been a primary caregiver to the aging parent and upon that parent’s death, the remaining sibling will come winging in, carrying “undue influence” arguments in their back pocket.

“You see a lot of family dynamics, good and bad,” says Rock. “And in these cases, everybody tends to walk away somewhat disgruntled.”

That’s what can happen when such an emotional and financially important dispute might be settled by something as simple and as unfor-giving as a photo album.

He had clients arguing that they’d been a parent’s prime caretakers while a brother was claiming he had been just as involved.

“I asked if they could give me something to prove the caretaker argument,” says Rock of his clients. “They taught me something. Sometimes the answer is simple. They brought out a photo album full of pictures of family events and activities. The brother was not in any of the photographs, and we used the album as proof.”

He says his job is mostly to keep the emo-tions in check as best he can.

“It’s a fact of life that a lot of people doing wills are often not in good shape when they make them,” says Rock. “It’s almost always cloudy because the person you really want to talk to is dead. Business-related cases are rational, almost always based on economic terms. Wills are much more emotional. Some of this goes back to the playground.”

He has challenged a will or two, but he usually defends them, sometimes despite not liking them all that much.

“Sometimes a will seems unfair, even to me,” he says. “But the law says you can do what you want with your money. So I’ll still



Rock and his wife, Julie, visit Stockholm, Sweden, in August 2013.

defend the will because it’s their decision to make, whether I think it is fair or not.”

Thus, he has developed the intervention skills of a referee to go with the teaching skills of a professional mentor.

“Jeff hired me out of law school,” say Julie Galassi, who joined him at Harvey & Stuckel after her 1988 interview. Galassi later moved with him to his brother’s firm.

“His reputation among our peers was that he was intelligent, collegial and hard-working,” she says. “They were the qualities I wanted to learn as a new lawyer, and I always wanted those qualities to be part of my career. A lot of lawyers don’t live up to that reputation, but that’s not true with Jeff.”

She says that when she was a young lawyer, Rock taught her the ins-and-outs of civil litigation. Now, she says, they trade ideas and collaborate, though not on everything.

Galassi handles employment litigation, general litigation and family law. She says Rock wants little to do with the latter. She says that’s because family law cases can involve one party slapping “naked pictures of a spouse on wind-shields” all across town or other more modern forms of “revenge porn” between family combatants. And those are just a couple of her experiences with the inventive and destructive foes in a dissolving marriage.

“You do question your involvement when you realize your best legal advice may be telling them, ‘Before you file for divorce, get rid of all the pictures,’” says Galassi, laughing. “In those cases, at best, Jeff will listen to me complain. Occasionally, he lets me cry on his shoulder.”

Maybe his aversion to discussing family law with Galassi stems from the fact that he’s seeing more and more family dysfunction in his own probate cases and there’s only so much one can tolerate.

Asked how long he will continue to pursue his profession, Rock is rendered momentarily speechless.

And then he laughs.

“Maybe I need a plan,” he says, chuckling again. He’ll have worked in the law for 37

years in October, and he says time and energy are becoming issues. That could be the result of his tendency to immerse himself in big, complex lawsuits over the years.

“He’s willing to tackle enormously complex cases single-handedly,” says Drew Parker, a longtime colleague and friend who practices at Parker and Parker in Peoria. “He had one case with so much discovery it filled most of an office.”

“My schedule is difficult, but part-time is hard to do,” says Rock, still thinking his way through the question.

His satisfying work in mediation could be the solution to his future years in the law. Mediation is also something he’s inordinately good at, according to Parker.

Mediation Fast, Satisfying

“He’s so good at handling people, he’s often asked to handle mediation by both sides in personal injury cases,” says Parker. “He’s almost James Bondish in his even-keeled approach. I’ve never, ever seen him angry.”

Never?

“Never,” says Parker.

“I really enjoy doing mediation,” Rock says. “You’ve got a problem, you listen, it’s resolved and then it’s over. In a personal injury or commercial lawsuit, you could spend two or three years in court. It’s fun to not have something on your mind for two or three years.”

It’s also quite possible he could pick and choose such mediated cases should he decide to reduce his workload, leaving him more time for family and travel.

He and wife Julie have three children. Sons Ben, 28, and Adam, 23, live in Chicago. Daughter Rachel, 25, works at Wright State University in Ohio.

He first met Julie as an undergrad at the University of Illinois.

“I didn’t like the guy she was dating and therefore I didn’t care much for her,” he says, smiling at the thought. “I ran into her again while visiting a friend. The boyfriend was gone

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and that time I thought she was pretty nice!”

In addition to seeing more of his family, he wants to keep traveling the world, too. He has long traveled with two local groups. The first includes Rock, his wife and a couple retired from Caterpillar. That foursome has made 25 trips to Belize, Panama and a variety of off-the-grid or off-the-beaten-path locations.

The second group includes three other lawyers and their wives with whom he and Julie have traveled all over the world.

Tim Bertschy of Heyl Royster considers Rock one of his best friends. The friendship is fortified by living in the same neighborhood, the friendship of their wives, their shared profession, and their involvement in that second travel group.

“He’s a wonderful lawyer, an intelligent guy with a lot of common sense,” says Bertschy. “He can be trusted to do the right thing. His integrity is impeccable. He keeps informed on the law and is always outcome-based. When I have a conflict and can’t take a client, he’s one lawyer I’ll recommend because I know they’ll be treated well.”

Wine, Dine and Travel

Their travels together only strengthen their relationship.

“We first traveled together about 12 years ago,” says Bertschy. “We enjoyed it and tried it again. It didn’t hurt that we were all part of the same gourmet eating club, either.”

They’ve traveled in France, Spain, Italy, and on a Yangtze River cruise in China. They recently completed a cruise/land trip that included Copenhagen, Denmark; Berlin and other parts of Germany; Lithuania; Poland; Estonia; Latvia; and St. Petersburg, Russia.

As many travelers do, Bertschy and Rock found out just how small the world can be while visiting those Baltic countries.

“Jeff and I spent an afternoon wandering around underground in a former Russian missile site in Lithuania,” says Bertschy. “While we were there, Jeff ran into a guy he went to law school with. Isn’t that crazy?”

Bertschy is drawn to Rock by his spirit and ability to have fun, something that appeals to Parker as well.

“He’s got a great sense of humor,” says Parker. “Jeff and his wife are close personal friends and we’ve been colleagues for almost 40 years. We went to different high schools, but I’ve known him since I was 14. And I don’t think he likes golf any better than I do.”

They do like being out on the water together with their wives, though.

“We often go out on a lake near my home in the summer,” says Parker. “Wine is involved. In fact, he’s a gourmet cook, so Jeff often brings both the food and the wine.”

As a friend goes, who could find one better than that? ■