

# Geoff Bryce

## Growing a Firm With Aggressiveness and Friendliness

by Dustin J. Seibert

Opening a new business can be a delicate undertaking under the best of circumstances. When opening his firm, Geoffrey A. Bryce didn't have the benefit of great circumstances.

Bryce was in Green Bay, Wis., trying a construction case for one of his clients when the firm, now known as **Bryce Downey & Lenkov LLC**, opened March 1, 2001. He received the message from hundreds of miles away that a mover accidentally clipped the head of a sprinkler in the new 312 W. Randolph Street location, resulting in a flooded office before its doors ever opened.

Two months later, the bursting of the dot-com bubble resulted in the firm repeatedly gaining and losing Internet service providers. At one point, it had to leech off the DSL connection of one of the tenants to which it leased.

Despite the rough start, Bryce and



company stayed the course. "We broke even at the end of that year," he says. "I figured, if we didn't lose any money after all this crap, we're going to be OK. And we've always made money ever since."

Bryce's own career-spanning aggressive approach to marketing, along with his infectious gregarious personality, has led to the firm's consistent growth. It's happened even in an economy that's not especially kind to the legal industry in general, especially practices that emphasize construction transactional work.

### Raised in Northwest Ohio

Bryce was raised in the small village of Montpelier, Ohio, which he describes as a "great place to be from." Bryce is the first of two sons to Jack and Beverly, who together owned and operated a newspaper and printing company.

He attended the University of Toledo, where during his junior year he met his would-be wife Sharon, a South Side Chicago native. They got engaged, and he moved to Chicago in 1972 with only \$100 in his pocket.

Bryce couldn't find a job that would put

his marketing degree to use, so he worked the second shift at Central Steel & Wire, cutting and packaging steel products. He did that for less than two years before taking a job at the now defunct manufacturing supply company Bosler Supply.

His tenure didn't last very long at Bosler, either. He found the work mundane and not worthy of a career.

Bryce found an ad in the newspaper seeking a docket clerk for Hackbert, Rooks Pitts Fullagar & Poust. It intrigued him because he was trying to figure out his next career step, and he'd already had law school on his short list.

"I figured I'd try it and see where it goes," he says. "I was out of college for a little over two years already, and I figured I had to do something involving law before going to law school."

Before law school, he went to DePaul University and obtained his master's degree in taxation. Though it exercised his mathematical skills, the coursework helped him realize he didn't have a future as an accountant.

"It was completely boring," he says. "The little creativity that exists with that

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stuff is not that challenging. After being a docket clerk and getting a master's, it seemed law school was just the right next step for me. And once I got admitted, I knew I made the right call."

## **Law: A Worthwhile Career**

When Bryce enrolled in The John Marshall Law School, Sharon was also in school and working as a full-time special education teacher for Chicago Public Schools. Because they were "getting by, but not very far," he also had to work full time during the day while attending classes at night.

Fortunately, for his wallet and future career, he received a promotion at Rooks Pitts from docket clerk to paralegal. "I got a few more bucks, but it was more fun because I got to work on cases," he says. "As my law school education progressed, I got more responsibilities."

One of his first big responsibilities as a paralegal was to analyze documents related to a construction defect case in the University of Illinois' Krannert Center for the Performing Arts building.

"They handed me about 150 boxes of construction documents and told me my job was to figure it all out within six weeks," he says. "They said I could do it from home, so I got the greatest tan of my life going through boxes on my patio. I said to myself, 'If this is practicing law, I'm in!'"

In addition to a zealous approach to his other paralegal work, Bryce successfully penned three motions for summary judgment granted by the court — an accomplishment that motivated the firm to promote him from a paralegal to an associate attorney immediately after law school. He was the first person in Rooks Pitts history to move from clerk to attorney.

Bryce immediately sunk his teeth into products liability cases, construction cases, insurance coverage claims and asbestos cases. His business background and a head for numbers made him feel at home in rooms filled with boxes full of documentation to sort out. I was also blessed because I got to try lots of small jury cases.

"I thought it was very interesting, like a big jigsaw puzzle," he says. "I was especially fascinated with construction work."

Spending a decade among the top three attorneys in billable hours at the firm resulted in Bryce's promotion to income partner eight years after he became an associate attorney.

"Because of my marketing and business background, I knew the only way I would succeed in this business is to get clients, so I did everything I possibly could," he says.

He developed part of his client base through connections he made penning a chapter on contractors and subcontractors

for an Illinois Institute for Continuing Legal Education book. His practice reached a point where he was handling the vast majority of Rooks Pitts' construction work by the late 1980s. Despite having plenty of client work, Bryce was concerned with the direction in which the firm was headed.

"I was looking around to see where the firm is going in terms of advancing our name and our business," he says. "Would we supplement our core business? Would we have a marketing plan going forward? Ultimately, I came to the conclusion that the plan was to have no plan."

"I told them that I think all we're doing is rearranging the chairs on the Titanic," he says. "I made no bones about the fact that they should get their act together, and no one paid attention. At 52, that didn't work for me. I said I'd rather run my own show."

Indeed, Bryce's portents came true. Rooks Pitts folded into Dykema in 2004. Fortunately, Bryce had kept in touch with Storrs Downey, who'd left Rooks Pitts for other firms several years prior to Bryce's departure after 25 years.

"We had talked over the years about starting up our own place, a smaller firm that's more client-directed and where we know all the attorneys on a first-name basis," Downey says. "I'd always been in insurance defense as Geoff had, so we envisioned our firm as a combination of insurance defense and commercial litigation."

It was Bryce's mentorship of Downey early in his career — in addition to the decade they worked together at Rooks Pitts — that motivated him to leave his firm and hang a shingle with Bryce.

"I always liked the way he interacted with clients and how he handled their cases," Downey says. "He thinks outside the box and is not cookie-cutter in his approach. Plus, his definition of success is not all monetary. He's all about loyalty and compassion for others, including attorneys and staff."

Lorence Slutzky, a recently retiree of Robbins Schwartz, has known Bryce since they served as opposing counsel on a building contractor case in the late 1970s. He echoes Downey's sentiments on Bryce's personable nature.

"Because construction litigation is often so contested, if you don't have a good working relationship with opposing counsel, it becomes exponentially more expensive," Slutzky says. "That's not an issue with Geoff. He's a straight shooter with a great demeanor and someone you can work with."

Slutzky founded the invitation-only Society of Illinois Construction Attorneys, of which Bryce is a member along with Querrey & Harrow attorney Bruce Schoumacher. Schoumacher says Bryce is always willing

to work with professional committees and volunteer his time to the industry.

"Wherever he goes, Geoff contributes a lot of good ideas," he says. "He's willing to volunteer and roll up his sleeves and get to work. I admire him a lot for that because it shows a lot about his professional attitude."

## **Wearing Variety of Hats**

Bryce Downey LLC started off with just the name attorneys and the clients who followed them from their respective firms. But associates and former colleagues of Bryce and Downey quickly joined up, growing the firm to seven attorneys after two months. Nearly 14 years later, the firm has 31 attorneys and seeks a couple more.

The firm has kept a robust client base during leaner times, Bryce says, thanks to its participation in several trade organizations and its aggressive push to gain clients. The firm conducts regular Internet seminars on insurance coverage, employment and workers' compensation that keep it connected with current and former clients.

"The seminars go out to an extensive list, and we get a lot of traction with them," Bryce says.

He admits his own practice took the worst hit of anyone in the firm during the downturn because the majority of it centers on real estate and construction.

"Three of my big contractors and developers bit the dust, taking a big chunk of my business, but not all of it," he says. "I have skill sets in products liability and insurance coverage matters, so I got as many insurance defense and coverage cases as I could. But I also got aggressive in other areas like workers' comp and employment."

Bryce says transactions are still slow. His practice consists of about 95 percent litigation, a dramatic increase from the 25 to 75 percent litigation-transactional split before the 2008 downturn.

"There's a lot of government work out there, but in terms of actual commercial work, it'll be slow for a while" he says. "Projects out there right now are few and far between. I've tried to encourage some of my developers to come back, but they aren't interested."

As Bryce Downey & Lenkov's managing capital member, the buck often stops with Bryce. It's a role that has changed significantly since the firm's early days. While he believes managing the money part of the firm is the easiest, "managing a firm starts with managing people."

"When we first started, there wasn't much to manage," he says. "But as we grew, the complexity and amount of time spent on that has increased and taken a bigger chunk of time than ever. Managing 32 lawyers is different than managing five guys who know

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each other well. What's the right call for the medical insurance? How do we manage bonuses this year? What's the budget for 2015? What do we pay our attorneys to be competitive? It's thinking about everything you can possibly imagine."

Every year, the firm seeks to implement one significant improvement in an effort to squeeze out inefficiencies. Recent improvements include the updating of time and billing and bookkeeping software and the rehabilitation of a 20-year-old telephone system that's been around since the firm opened.

"We paid chicken feed for it and had a supplier who could keep it going," Bryce says. "But one of these years, either the provider would go away or we won't be able to get parts, and it'll break down and we'll be dead. Can you imagine lawyers without phones?"

In 2015, the firm plans to completely upgrade its information technology systems. "The servers are old, and I don't want to be down for one minute because that's a lot of money out the door," he says.

### **His Future and the Firm's**

Bryce Downey & Lenkov has a Crown Point, Ind., office and satellite offices in Memphis and Atlanta. Bryce says the firm plans to ultimately have 40 attorneys at its main office, with the partners taking stock of what to do next.

In the meantime, Bryce intends to maintain the firm's commitment to fundraising and civic work. That includes its firm-wide participation in the Hustle Up the Hancock climb to raise money for the Respiratory Health Association, the Plunge, and its sponsorship of the 5K Race Judicata.

Bryce is physically active and climbs mountains (Lost Eagle Peak in Wyoming's Wind River Range, with two engineers from one of Tampa's leading engineering firms). He participates in many sports and has personally participated in the Skyline Plunge Chicago five times, rappelling 27 stories down the Wit Hotel on North State Street. Sharon joined him for the Plunge this fall.

"It's a riot, and views from up there are tremendous," he says.

At 65, Bryce still has many years of the practice — and several Plunges — left in him. But when he does retire, his desires for the firm that he helped create are rather simple.

"I aspire to leave it in good condition, and to have the people who take the leadership reins grow the firm and continue to provide high-quality legal service to all our clients," he says. "That quality is the most important part, and I always strive to meet the highest standard." ■