

CRAIG JEFFREY

Mapping out Clients' Customized Solutions in Real Estate, Finance

by Sherry Karabin



It was a typical transaction with an unusual wrinkle. But when a client requested that Riley Safer Holmes & Cancila LLP partner Craig D. Jeffrey assist in setting up a bidding system to sell a central business district office tower, he was definitely up for the challenge.

"The client was not a real estate operator and had been trying to sell the tower for a couple of years, but each time they ran into challenges and the closing never happened," says Jeffrey, who focuses on real estate and finance transactions.

Jeffrey worked directly with the general counsel, who did not have a real estate background, to set up a bidding procedure.

"The auction sought to identify the highest price from a bidder most likely to close on the transaction," he says. "There were many steps involved in creating the procedure, a first of its kind for the client, and I had to carefully consider and explain the implications of the system we were setting up.

"It was a fascinating process," Jeffrey says. "The GC, broker and I interviewed the three highest bidders over a 48-hour period. We selected the bidder and negotiated the final

purchase and sale agreement.

"We are now on the pathway to what we both believe will be a successful closing."

While the project was a bit unusual, Jeffrey's approach to tackling it was not any different.

Jeffrey says the matters he handles always have a lot of moving parts, so he begins by mapping out the individual components and assigning team members to accomplish each task.

"Whether a land sale, lease or financing, I work backwards from the due date, identifying exactly when the various steps must be completed in order to reach the destination," says Jeffrey. "I make sure each team member has a copy of the roadmap so that we're all on the same page and we hit every milestone.

"I see my role as bringing order to the chaos and then managing the plan I put in place to make sure everything goes smoothly."

It's a winning approach that yields high praise from clients like Carlos Cardenas, group senior vice president at Wintrust Commercial Banking.

"I met Craig about 10 years ago when I was working at JPMorgan Chase, and

we have worked together since then," says Cardenas. "He currently represents the bank in its documentation of capital transactions for our clients.

"He is a very thoughtful lawyer who will work with you to find simple ways to handle complex transactions," Cardenas says. "The best part of working with Craig is that he not only understands the legal side, but he also tries to understand the nature of the transaction itself.

"He wants to know what your client does, how they generate cash and revenue, and who their customers are. He then uses that information to customize the structure of the transaction."

Jeffrey met his client Paul E. Bennett II, associate general counsel and vice president at Landmark Dividend LLC in El Segundo, California, in law school.

When Bennett took on his current role, he retained Jeffrey to review contracts and handle other matters related to Landmark's acquisition of a large solar farm.

"We have since used him to provide advice on several real estate and financial

transactions,” he says. “Craig is incredibly competent.

“I think the sign of a bright person is someone who can take a complex subject or matter and break it down into simple speak,” says Bennett. “I am an attorney myself, but I have numerous things going on, and it helps to have someone like Craig who can break the issues down quickly so I can advise the CEO or others at the company.”

AN UNWAVERING DEDICATION

Born in Brooklyn, New York, Jeffrey and his four siblings grew up in Springfield Gardens, Queens.

His passion for the law began early, he says, as he recalls putting a comma and “Esq.” after his name as a child.

“I am not sure I knew exactly what that meant, but I knew I was going to be a lawyer,” he says. “My parents, Franklin and Elizabeth, were small business owners, and dad was a civil servant. In business, anytime there was a significant contractual dispute my dad would hire a lawyer. I saw, critically, through the lens of my parents the role a lawyer could play in helping owners.

“Although young, I remember making judgments as to whether their lawyers had performed well. I was committed to one day helping businesses more effectively than the counselors they had hired. As you can tell, there was a lot of planning that went into becoming a lawyer, and there would be a little bit of serendipity.”

After graduating from The Dalton School, he enrolled at Grinnell College in Iowa.

Within days of arriving on campus, he met his future wife, Manali.

“Our relationship blossomed,” he says. They married in 2000 and have two boys Daniel, 11, and Anik, 8.

Jeffrey completed his undergraduate degree at Baruch College in New York, attending night classes while working for the United Federation of Teachers.

“I started at the union in an administrative role. After nine months or so, I began inquiring about opportunities in the communications space,” Jeffrey says. “I interviewed with the director of communications and when I returned to my desk, I got a call from Sandra Feldman, the president of the union. She offered me the chance to join the legislative team. She had heard about the interview and thought I could be useful there.

“As a young person, it was an amazing opportunity,” he says. “I remember that while serving as a lobbyist I could always tell the difference between legislators who had law degrees and those who did not. It really reinforced my plans to go to law school and

dedicate myself to the profession.”

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

After receiving his bachelor’s degree in political science, Jeffrey returned to Iowa, attending the University of Iowa College of Law. While a rising 2L, he accepted a summer associate position in the St. Louis office of the firm now known as Bryan Cave Leighton Paisner LLP.

“I had identified the firm as one with sophisticated practices and offices across the country, including in New York City, before I left for law school,” he says. “They offered me full time employment after my 2L summer, and I began my law career in 2000 after graduating law school. Again, it was a lot of planning and some serendipity.”

Jeffrey always knew he wanted to be a transactional attorney, so he completed rotations in the real estate & banking, mergers & acquisitions, and restructuring groups.

“I was invited to join each of those groups,” he says. “I chose real estate & banking because I liked the clients, my colleagues and the opportunities ahead,” he says.

“It helps to have someone like Craig who can break the issues down quickly so I can advise the CEO or others.”

Jeffrey says while it’s quite demanding, he enjoys the fact that each transaction has a relatively defined, fast-paced lifecycle.

“While litigators might find themselves working on a case for years, in my world transactions can sometimes close in as little as days or weeks,” he says. “And if done properly, all sides leave the table, relatively speaking, having accomplished their goals.

“I also like that real estate is a tangible practice. When the transaction is completed, I can usually point to a building or company that I helped grow. I find it very fulfilling.”

Jeffrey says he was confident he could excel in the practice group, and indeed his talent didn’t go unnoticed.

LIFE-CHANGING OPPORTUNITY

In 2004, after developing his practice, Jeffrey says the chairman asked if anyone at the firm would be willing to help expand the Chicago office.

Jeffrey, who had fully integrated into the local community, serving on boards and mentoring youth, was planning for the long haul.

Nevertheless, he says, “My wife and I

discussed it, and we decided to seize the opportunity.

“The Chicago office was much different than what I was used to. In St. Louis, the firm had a commanding presence in the market. There were 15 attorneys in Chicago, and we were small compared to the large firms. A lot of planning and some serendipity.”

He was determined to do his part to grow the office and its client base.

In 2009, Jeffrey was elected partner. He later served as hiring partner for six years as well as taking on other client facing and internal roles at the firm.

It was toward the end of his tenure at Bryan Cave when Jeffrey was called upon by his new client, a publicly traded REIT (real estate investment trust), to accomplish a major feat.

His assignment: review more than 130 parcels of real estate for a renewable energy project and complete the work within eight days.

“I assembled a team, and we completed the project early and under budget,” says Jeffrey. “The client was able to successfully close on what would be the REIT’s largest transaction that year. It was thrilling for the paralegals, associates and me.”

John Boyle, a partner at Doster Ullom & Boyle, LLC, served as the practice group leader of the real estate & banking group at Bryan Cave Leighton Paisner for much of the time Jeffrey was at the firm.

“Craig demonstrated early in his career that he possesses a high-octane legal IQ,” says Boyle. “In addition, and what distinguishes him from many of his peers, is his ability to connect with clients, his peers, the courts and the community.

“Craig has amazing people skills, he always has,” Boyle says. “That combination of legal talent and the ability to relate to people and situations puts Craig in a very elite class of practicing attorneys. And for that, I hold him in the highest regard.”

A NEW PLATFORM

Although Jeffrey enjoyed a fruitful career at Bryan Cave, he left the firm in August 2017 to take on his current position as a partner in the Chicago office of Riley Safer Holmes & Cancala.

“This platform allows for more flexibility within practice areas and a better ability to allow clients to leverage my long view,” he says. “I may be counseling or leading transactions outside of my primary areas of expertise.”

Edward Shin, vice president, general counsel and secretary at Clopay Building Products in Mason, Ohio, is one such client.

“I have relied on Craig’s expertise since I went in house in 2008,” says Shin. “Although I haven’t used him to handle real estate matters,

Craig is a relationship partner. I rely on him to vet attorneys for matters on behalf of the company.

“When I need assistance on a matter, I pick up the phone and ask him to find me an attorney who fits the bill for whatever I require. He not only finds me the best person, he continues to monitor the matter, staying involved until it’s completed.

“His client management and relationship skills are second to none.”

In addition to assisting clients, Jeffrey currently serves on the firm’s human resources, benefits and retirement committee.

“Recently, I have been tasked with focusing on the firm’s real estate assets and how we use them,” he says.

Cheryl Walker, of counsel at Riley Safer Holmes & Cancila, has known Jeffrey since he was a summer associate at Bryan Cave.

“My impression of Craig back then is the same as it is now: a client-focused, hard worker on a constant mission to learn all he can about the practice of law,” says Walker. “When he was a young associate in the St. Louis office of Bryan Cave, we were in the same practice group, and I had the pleasure of working with him on many client matters where I witnessed Craig utilize his gifts of insightfulness and communication.

“He always puts forth his best efforts for his clients and applies the same dedication, energy and skill set no matter the size of the client or the complexity of the matter,” she says.

“Craig demands from those around him exactly what he gives, superior service.”

COMMITMENT TO THE COMMUNITY

While he’s moved a few times throughout his life, Jeffrey and his family now call the Chicago neighborhood of Hyde Park/Kenwood their home.

Jeffrey says when he becomes a member of a community he makes a point to contribute, with the goal of leaving it in a better place than when he arrived. He has captained a championship sports team, led student governments, worked with a circus, served on a school board and much more.

“When I moved to Chicago, I got involved in a number of organizations that focused on supporting youth in underserved communities and making those communities stronger,” Jeffrey says.

Jeffrey currently spends the majority of his time assisting Quad Communities Development Corporation and Chicago Youth Centers.

A nonprofit organization, Chicago Youth Centers provides tools and resources to youth between the ages of 3 and 18, helping them to

develop academically, socially and emotionally.

“I began as pro bono legal counsel at Chicago Youth Centers in 2007,” says Jeffrey. “I have since served on several committees, including the facilities and the executive director search committee. As a current board member, I, and my firm, provide legal advice on all real estate impacting our mission.”

Jeffrey became involved with Quad Communities Development Corporation because of his passion for economic development. The organization seeks to improve the quality of life for those living in the south lakefront communities of North Kenwood, Oakland, Douglas and Grand Boulevard.

“The board was looking for a ‘big law’ person who shared their vision and mission,” says Jeffrey, who serves as vice chair and is on the executive committee. “Our goal is to build robust retail corridors and help support the businesses—like my parents’—in those communities. If the businesses are thriving, that will lead to employment and a better quality of life, all resulting in healthier neighborhoods.”

WHAT’S NEXT

Looking down the road, Jeffrey has no plans to make any major changes anytime soon.

“Professionally, my main goal is to have an explosive impact on my firm’s practice,” he says. “We are a relatively young organization, so in many ways the sky is the limit.”

On a personal level, he views each day as a chance to have a positive impact on the lives of others.

“I want to continue to advance so I am in a good position to provide life-altering opportunities to young people,” says Jeffrey, 48.

He also makes a point to spend quality time with his wife and children.

“I try to do things that revolve around their interests,” Jeffrey says. “This past summer, on my older son’s urging, we went fishing locally. And my younger son loves basketball, so I’ve found myself in gyms bouncing the ball awkwardly.

“My family loves to travel and, when I can, I join them on trips abroad. I am the kind of traveler who takes things as they come. I get off the plane with no expectations whatsoever.”

While he does not have much time for hobbies, he occasionally dabbles in a passion close to his heart.

“I grew up motorcycling, and I still love thinking, talking and once in a while going riding,” he says.

“We will see what planning and a little bit of serendipity will lead to down the road.” ■