

JOSEPH McCOY

Trailblazer and Natural Leader

by Lauren P. Duncan

When Joseph Q. McCoy was approached about joining an esteemed new Chicago-based law firm in 2017, he faced a dilemma: Should he stay in the already great position he was in or should he try his hand at something brand new?

After considerable thought, he concluded that the opportunity beckoning him was irresistible. In July, he left his position as the managing partner of the Chicago office of Bryan Cave LLP to join the year-old Riley Safer Holmes & Cancila LLP along with seven other Bryan Cave attorneys.

One remark McCoy heard from people was “They don’t even have a transactions group. What are you doing?”

“I said, ‘Well, that’s the opportunity,’” McCoy says. “How many times do you get to join a group of outstanding lawyers like this and actually bring a complementary practice to what they’re doing and create it from a whiteboard? How many times in your career do you get to do that?”

McCoy joined RSHC as the leader of its new business transactions group.

“It just got to the point where I said, ‘Why not?’ Why not try something different? Why not help build a group for a firm—which is different from me just building my own practice—and why not see what kind of opportunities you can create and see if there’s a different way you can tackle client problems?” he says.

“I think it’s a good firm. I think it’s a good opportunity, and they’re not saying come build it in isolation, they’re saying, hey, we’re building and growing this thing. Come help us do that.”

A FLEXIBLE, WINDING PATH

Several of McCoy’s characteristics make him stand out among his peers. For one, only so many former starting college football quarterbacks work in real estate law. Second, he was one of only two black managing partners among Illinois’ top 100 firms when he was named to the position in 2014.

In other words, he’s not afraid to go where few others have gone.

McCoy landed in some of these unique



positions by following a path that required flexibility and detours from his original plans.

McCoy, 45, is a native of Little Rock, Arkansas. He moved to Chicago after high school and went on to become the starting quarterback for the University of Chicago football team, which landed him a spot in the school’s Athletics Hall of Fame. He earned his bachelor’s degree, with honors, and a master’s degree from the university.

After interning for the Chicago White Sox, working for a not-for-profit tutoring/mentoring agency, and doing educational research for a professor at Northwestern University, McCoy decided law school might be his path to becoming a sports agent.

“That’s really what kind of kicked me toward going to law school, that it was going to be a situation that created more options. I had no idea what lawyers really did. But I knew sports, and I was like, ‘OK, being an agent, having a law degree, that would be a good thing,’” he says.

He went on to earn his J.D. at Northwestern University School of Law and joined Katten

Muchin Rosenman LLP, which today is known in part for its representation of sports teams and athletes.

McCoy ended up focusing on transactional work and joined the firm’s real estate group, where he got to develop a broad range of experience.

After three years at Katten Muchin, McCoy felt the desire to pursue his interest in sports managing again. He did something else that few attorneys have done: He and some friends started a professional women’s basketball franchise, the Chicago Blaze.

During this time, McCoy continued to practice law and develop his legal skills, ultimately joining a former partner who had left Katten to open his own shop.

McCoy later went on to work for what was then Schwartz Cooper for four years, where he started a sports practice, including becoming a licensed agent in the NBA, WNBA and NFL. When Schwartz merged with Dykema in 2008, McCoy took his practice to Perkins Coie LLP, where he co-founded the firms’

practice in airport concessions during his four years before joining Bryan Cave in 2012.

LONGTIME NATURAL LEADER

Throughout the twists and turns in McCoy's career, he has consistently taken leadership positions. Whether it was serving on his high school's student council, being the captain of different sports teams, developing his own sports practice, or becoming a managing partner, McCoy says he counts himself fortunate to have had the opportunities he's seized.

"I've embraced them when the opportunity has presented itself because I also want to make a difference. I think there's a lot that we do as lawyers, and I think there are different ways to influence outcomes," McCoy says.

"Through some of the leadership opportunities, you're able to drive exposure and opportunities for others, and that's really, for me, the magic of leadership: How do I use this platform to create opportunities for other people?"

In addition to the opportunities to lead, McCoy expresses gratitude for the opportunity to make legal history as one of only a few black managing partners of large law firms.

"It was and still is an incredibly proud moment," he says. "For our community, it was a big deal. I tried to embrace that role and that responsibility relative to trying to be a resource for as many folks as I could and trying to leverage that position so others could have a chance."

"It was an incredibly humbling opportunity and experience. I didn't realize it at the time, but it meant a lot to a lot of people," he says. "It's our success, not my success, and that actually makes a huge difference. So many people have supported me along this journey from mentors to my friends in the mail room to my friends at the reception desk to my colleagues. No one is successful on their own."

While McCoy was setting an example as a law firm leader, he was also developing his own practice. From the start of his legal career, McCoy says, he's remained focused on relationship building and driving the best outcomes for his clients.

At RSHC, McCoy says he's been strategic about focusing on the areas in which he's most knowledgeable, particularly in the areas of real estate and corporate finance, corporate real estate portfolio management, commercial contracts, and representing business owners in a variety of industries, which has led to growth of the firm's business transaction group's client base, as well as his airport concessions practice.

"I know we can be effective because those are spaces we know very well, we are familiar with, we can compete with whomever, and I think we have the right mindset and the right touch with clients," he says.

In the six months McCoy has been with

the firm, several of the firm's existing clients have turned to his group to handle corporate and business transactions, something the firm didn't offer before.

"Now we do have the business side of the house and...our clients also have litigation needs, due diligence on M&A, labor and employment needs. There's a marriage there of opportunity, and so I would say going on six months in, you always hope the clients are with you...and they continue to prove that they are, and so that's a huge plus. Going into a new situation, you always hope folks will support you. And that certainly has happened.

"I'm just excited to see what comes next, how we continue to grow it, how we continue to expand opportunities, how we are able to leverage this platform to create new experience and opportunities for our junior lawyers and just kind of see where it goes."

GETTING CLIENTS FROM A TO B

In addition to the appeal of the opportunities, McCoy says his decision to join RSHC was also the result of a "very persuasive" firm leader.

That's Patricia Brown Holmes, a former judge who in 2016 left Schiff Hardin LLP along with 21 other partners to found RSHC.

Holmes has known McCoy for about 12 years through McCoy's longtime mentor, Demetrius Carney, and through his wife, Jamenda, who was part of a class Holmes mentored in the Black Women Lawyers Association of Greater Chicago.

"Joseph is the consummate professional—well-spoken, savvy, charismatic, thoughtful, spiritual and extremely entrepreneurial. He is the kind of lawyer toward whom everyone gravitates. It is exciting to have him in the firm," Holmes says.

"Joseph has an uncanny ability to inspire trust. He is very measured and thoughtful in his comments and presentation. He is analytical and thorough, respectful and warm. Clients view him as a trusted adviser, friend and partner. I view him like a younger brother. He's just that sweet.

"He is a real down to earth and sincere person. People believe in him and trust that he will give good advice and be in the trenches on every deal. He's entrepreneurial in a way that lets one know he is constantly thinking about the best interests of his clients."

Also among those who founded RSHC is Ronald S. Safer, Schiff's former longtime managing partner.

Safer says he knew he wanted McCoy to join RSHC from the time the firm was founded.

"When we started our firm in March 2016, I wanted Joseph to join because of the deep respect I have for him as a person and a lawyer. He resisted my attempts to recruit him for a while, but we stayed in touch, and

he ultimately agreed it would be a good fit. I was elated as was the entire firm," Safer says.

Safer cites a few personal characteristics that make clients trust McCoy, including that he is calming, a person he has never seen flustered. Safer says McCoy also is often "the smartest person in the room, but he is completely without pretense."

"He is the same clear-thinking person whether he is handling a crisis or an ordinary issue. His integrity is unquestioned," Safer says.

"Joseph is a problem solver," Safer adds. "He understands his clients' business and works tirelessly and creatively to meet their business goals. Unlike so many lawyers who see issues as legal issues and continually tell their clients what they can't do, Joseph finds a way for the clients to get where they want to go.

"The path they take may be a little different from the one they envision because of regulations or other impediments, but Joseph finds a way to get them there. He searches the map for any possible road, and if one doesn't exist, he blazes a new trail," Safer says.

A COMMUNITY PLAYER

In addition to his career developments within the firm, McCoy has a number of irons in the fire outside of the office.

One of those is a real estate secured transactions course he's taught as an adjunct professor at Northwestern Law for about eight years.

McCoy came up with the idea for the course when he served on the school's law board. The course involves managing a deal over a semester from negotiating a letter of intent to closing the transactions. Students have to handle the negotiations and draft documents.

"We teach them about what it means to be a lawyer. We teach them about reputation. We teach them about what it means to be civil in a negotiation. We teach them about client expectations. We bring clients in and talk to them and have very frank conversations," he says. "I think students need to hear these things, and I think it better prepares them to go into the practice."

He has also served the past 12 years as chairman of Urban Prep Academies, for nine years on the board of the Chicago Committee on Minorities in Large Law Firms, for seven years on the board of Leadership Greater Chicago, and for six years on the board of the Illinois Equal Justice Foundation. He currently holds leadership positions at the Partnership for College Completion and the Cleveland Avenue Foundation for Education.

McCoy also puts his vast knowledge of and experience in sports to use these days, only this time at the beginner level. He coaches the basketball teams of both his 11-year-old son, Quentin, and his 9-year-old daughter, Jordyn. ■