

LIFOCUS

Learned before they were lawyers

Attorneys who did something else first find it helps them in their law practice

By **BERNADETTE STARZEE**

Before building his practice as a construction litigation attorney, Stavros Karageorgiou did a lot of building.

Karageorgiou grew up working in his family's construction business in Queens, doing electrical and general construction work from a very young age.

"I came up through the ranks, estimating, working as an assistant project manager, senior project manager, operations manager, general construction manager," said Karageorgiou, who obtained his undergraduate degree in construction management and became a certified construction manager and licensed master electrician.

He then decided to go to law school – not with the original intention of practicing law, but to "augment the work I was doing at the construction company."

But while attending Fordham University School of Law at night, things changed.

"I decided I really enjoyed the legal side of things," said Karageorgiou, who joined Uniondale-based law firm Farrell Fritz in February. As an associate in the commercial litigation practice with a concentration in construction, it's his construction background that is augmenting his legal practice rather than the other way around – particularly when it comes to client relations.

"I sat where most of my clients sit," he said. "I've been in the trenches, and I can share battle stories. I understand the pressures and risks of undertaking a construction project, and I've seen the ups and downs and am able to coach them through that process."

Karageorgiou is not the only attorney that has walked a particular walk before talking the talk. Other Long Island lawyers are well-positioned to advise clients based on the expertise they gained working in another profession or company prior to practicing law.

Francine Adler is a doctor and a lawyer. She began her career working in healthcare, having obtained a doctorate in podiatric medicine.

But in addition to science, she had a strong interest in public policy and general healthcare issues, which led her to go to law school with the goal of becoming a healthcare attorney.

First, Adler worked in patent law, applying her medical background to the prosecution and litigation of pharmaceutical patents. She went on to a more general healthcare practice, advising physicians and other providers with setting up and running private practices.

"When physicians come out of medical school, they want to hit the ground running and see patients, but they have no idea what to do" with regard to the business and compliance side, she said.

Adler, who since the start of 2015 has been an associate in the healthcare services practice at Rivkin Radler in Uniondale, finds her medical background is very helpful when advising healthcare providers on regulatory, reimbursement and compliance matters.

"I come to the table able to speak the language of physicians," Adler said. "It gives me a little more credibility with the physicians when I'm advising them. I understand what they're talking about from a scientific and technical background, and I understand the challenges they face on a day-to-day basis."

Stacey Gulick also advises healthcare companies in a wide variety of matters as a partner at Garfunkel Wild, a Great Neck-based law firm with a large healthcare practice that she joined as a newly minted attorney in 2001. Prior to going to law school, Gulick, who holds a master's degree in health administration, worked in healthcare as a medical staff coordinator, risk manager and compliance officer.

"The practical experience I gained from working in hospital administration has been invaluable," she said. "I know firsthand how legal advice and legal theories are implemented in a real-life hospital setting."



FRANCINE ADLER: Her experience as a foot doctor gave her a strong footing as a healthcare attorney.



STACEY GULICK: As a former healthcare administrator, she knows firsthand how legal advice is implemented.



STAVROS KARAGEORGIU: He understands the ups and downs of the construction business after spending time in the trenches.



DAVID WILCK: Observing outside lawyers while at an international insurance company, he learned what to do and not to do as an attorney.

When she first began her legal practice, she benefited from a shorter learning curve.

"My background gave me familiarity with the language of healthcare," she said. "I knew what all the acronyms stood for."

Further, her years working in healthcare administration gave her a long list of contacts, which helped her build her client base.

As in-house professional liability claims counsel for an international insurance company, David Wilck also built up a considerable Rolodex. And since his employer was a substantial consumer of legal services, he had the opportunity to deal with many outside attorneys, giving him a unique education about what to do and not to do when servicing clients.

"I was able to observe different lawyers and how they represented insurers and communicated to insurance companies," said Wilck, who is now a partner in the professional liability, directors and officers liability, and intellectual property practice groups at Rivkin Radler.

As part of his role with the insurance company, Wilck made decisions about which attorneys to retain and attended trials and mediations, adopting the most effective styles and tactics.

"In my practice today, I am able to draw upon so many different lawyers," he said. Besides courtroom techniques, this extends to little things that can go a long way in keeping clients satisfied.

"At the insurance company, I liked when lawyers returned my phone calls within a day," he said. "I learned what made me want to hire a particular lawyer, and I try to be that lawyer today – I return phone calls quickly, I write reports that are easy to read and I give clients realistic budgets."

Wilck, who practiced with a Manhattan law firm before joining the insurance company, said his decision to go in-house "was probably the best thing I ever did in my career."

He returned to the law firm side, however, because he missed the courtroom. This time around, he sees himself as a more complete attorney – a view shared by others.

"I routinely get calls from people who say they have a unique assignment that they want me to handle because I was in-house," he said. "Their mind is at ease when they see my background, and they get a comfort level knowing I was on the other side."

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