

# DIVERSITY

& THE BAR

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## Looking Back, Pushing Forward

IMPROVING LAW  
SCHOOL DIVERSITY

OUR ANNUAL LIST  
OF RAINMAKERS

HOW LAW SCHOOLS  
ARE IMPROVING  
DIVERSITY

MCCA'S 15<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL GENERAL COUNSEL SURVEY

## RICHARD RUSSETH

### All Of Us Face Challenges

BY TOM CALARCO

Everyone, even his parents, thought that attorney Richard Russeth, who was born with a hearing impairment, had a learning disability when he was growing up.



“IT WAS TOUGH,” he says of growing up in Minnesota. “It was the early ’60s. My parents and teachers didn’t understand. They all equated a hearing problem with a lack of intelligence. They didn’t figure out that I needed hearing aids until seventh grade. Until then, I was a *really* poor student.”

But he now looks back on the experience as a positive: “I became good at reading body language, filling in the missing parts of a conversation and learning to read really well. I read a lot of books since the radio and TV didn’t work with my hearing. It all really helped me later as a lawyer, actually.”

His father, Quentin Russeth, didn’t dwell on Richard’s disability, never let him use it as an excuse for avoiding a challenge or suffering a failure, and he always supported his efforts. But even though his grades improved after receiving hearing aids, he was still often treated differently. “My guidance counselor in high school tried to steer me

to a menial profession because he was concerned about my hearing disability,” he says.

Things changed when Russeth earned a perfect score on a high school intelligence test. “The perception of me was so different after that,” he says. “I was placed in honors/advanced placement courses, where I met an English teacher, Sharon Roe, who mentored, encouraged and made me feel there was nothing I couldn’t do. I am still in touch with her 40 years later. I owe a great deal of my success to her.”

Russeth graduated summa cum laude from St. Cloud State University, but says he still struggled in class despite using two powerful hearing aids. “I’ve never been able to take notes because I depended then

almost totally on lip reading, so I couldn’t just look down and take a note because I’d miss the next thing the professor said. I sat and listened. After the lecture, I would try to replay the lecture in my head and make notes.”

Russeth, who majored in history, says he thought about becoming a professor but didn’t because he felt uncomfortable at the time talking in front of people. He says he was always driven to prove “people wrong—that being deaf or severely hearing impaired doesn’t limit what someone can achieve in this world.”

As a result, he matriculated at the University of Minnesota Law School, where he formed close friendships with fellow students—who helped him on that note-taking thing. His eventual entry into the practice of law was aided by family associations.

“My father worked for the Pillsbury Company. My family belonged to a ski group made up of Pillsbury people,” he says. “During the holidays, we would go skiing with them. As a little kid, I used to ride up the chair lift with people like the president of Pillsbury and also Bill Powell, who was their general counsel back in the ’60s.”

Another Pillsbury lawyer from those ski trips was Ron Lund, the assistant general counsel, who eventual-

ly hired Russeth as an intern. Russeth worked almost full-time throughout law school. The internship led to a lawyer position at Pillsbury, where he worked 13 years, rising from clerk to the position of general counsel for the Haagen-Dazs Ice Cream Company (his favorite career position despite gaining 20 lbs!). Success at Pillsbury led to a series of senior legal positions in the food industry. Currently, he is the general counsel and vice president of corporate affairs for Denver-based Leprino Foods, where he has been since 2005. Leprino is the world’s largest manufacturer of mozzarella cheese.

“My mantra is ‘always try to avoid saying no to a client’s needs.’ But that approach means I have to make doubly sure that the client never takes a risk that it doesn’t fully understand,” says Russeth. He likens his role to providing a “roadmap” that will keep his company within the boundaries of the law, but still get it to where it wants to go on the safest path.

But over the years, his hearing continued to worsen. By 2006, he was, for all intents, legally deaf and worried that he might have to leave the profession due to his rapidly failing hearing.

“I’ve always carried it with me (this hearing impairment),” he says. “There is always prejudice out there, even oth-

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er lawyers underestimating me (often to their own client's detriment) because of my hearing. I think disability prejudice is, like so much prejudice, hardwired into our society."

Because of his rapidly worsening hearing, he decided to undergo surgery for a cochlear implant. A receiver is implanted in the person's head that runs electrodes into the cochlea of the ear. The receiver communicates with an external transmitter that sits on one's ear and creates "sound" by sending signals to those electrodes thousands of times a second.

"Two weeks after the surgery, I could hear things I'd never before heard," he says. "I heard a knocking one day that was a clock ticking. But I didn't know what it was because I didn't know what a clock sounded like—it drove me crazy! Everything sounded new—even old songs sounded brand-new to me."

Law has been a good career for Russeth, but, like for so many, stressful. He's a big believer that creative outlets such as writing, photography, yoga and volunteering can ease the stress. "Everyone needs something to give them perspective, to get them away from thinking about the law constantly," he says. "Lawyers are so crunched for time; they often don't take care of themselves very well. Exercise is great, but the mind needs different stimulation, too. Having strong outside interests and activities helps me be more mentally sharp, more creative and ultimately a better lawyer for my clients. I think that would be true for most lawyers."

Writing has been a longtime love of Russeth's. He writes poetry, which reflects not only on contemporary issues but on the meaning of life. One poem, "Prophets," muses on the general obliviousness of modern society to the ills of the world and shows the depth of Russeth's thinking. It concludes:

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even other lawyers underestimating me  
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because of my hearing. I think  
disability prejudice is, like so much  
prejudice, hard wired into our society.

If I were a prophet, I might say to you:

"In this perfectly broken world,  
you must see  
that which strives to be hidden,  
hear those voices others would  
deny,  
taste the bitterness of the  
forgotten,  
and yet love all of it without  
exception,  
as if your life depended on it—  
because it does."


His interest in photography culminated recently in his first public exhibition from which a portion of the proceeds went to the organization Art from Ashes, which uses creative writing to help troubled youth.

Russeth says that religion was never a big part of his life until he read a book called "Velvet Elvis" by Rob Bell, which opened his eyes to a movement known as emergent Christianity. The book offered a fresh take on Jesus and asserts that Jesus wanted people to live in tune with reality. "Bell's vision of Christianity left room for doubts and doubters," says Russeth, "which describes me." He then was drawn to a small Lutheran church in Denver, House for All Sinners and Saints, pastored by Nadia Bolz-Weber, a minister who has authored several books about emergent Christianity. "The church is an inclusive community and reflects my outlook in life," he says. "Not

only has it brought community to me and my wife, but it has provided spiritual support for me as a lawyer."

His experiences with the church inspired him to chair the board of the Urban Servant Corps, a nonprofit that advocates for social change on behalf of the people at the fringe of society. "They have a program in which they place volunteers full time for one year at various nonprofits that work with all kinds of issues, from the homeless to those learning to deal with, survive and overcome the discrimination that the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) community constantly faces," he says. After three years, Russeth stepped down as chairman last year.

"I'm in between gigs as far as volunteering goes," he says, "and looking for something new and exciting. At the moment, I'm fascinated by the Art from Ashes program."

Whatever he does, he wants to help people learn that they can achieve their goals—if they put in the effort. "All of us face different challenges," he says. "I want people to realize that there are others who have come before them and faced and overcome the same challenges." 

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