

# BOB RILEY

## A Born Trial Lawyer With Focus, Foresight for Prolific Career

by Lauren P. Duncan

Even before former judge Patricia Brown Holmes attended the wedding of Robert H. Riley's daughter, she was already well aware of Riley's natural fit as a legal advocate.

The two had been practicing together for several years, but sitting by Riley's older brother at the wedding, Holmes heard a personal story that shed light on just how innate Riley's love for the law is.

As the story goes, Holmes says, Riley, his brother and their friends had saved up money from odd jobs and went out to go shopping to buy some new toys, like skates and a bike.

What did 8-year-old Bob Riley want to cash-in on? A suit and a briefcase.

"He knew when he was coming out of the womb that he was going to be a lawyer," Holmes says.

It is that focus from the beginning that undoubtedly has factored into Riley's continued success over four decades in the profession. He not only rose to become the leader of a major law firm but, with others, established the thriving firm of Riley Safer Holmes & Cancila LLP ("RSHC").

### EARLY INFLUENCES

For someone who as a kid was ready to dress the part of a lawyer, it's fitting that one of Riley's earliest memories in life involves the experience that likely planted the seed to what would become a flourishing career.

Riley recalls being a very young child when his mother took him to a courthouse to see his father, Jerry Riley, a trial lawyer, in action in a courtroom. He remembers immediately thinking that the courtroom "must be the greatest place in the world."

"And ever since that moment, I've honestly thought what I really want to do is to be in the well of a courtroom," Riley recalls. "I had no idea what it actually meant. I was a little kid. It just resonated with me in a way that never changed."

Fast forward a few years, and Riley made his way from his hometown of Toledo, Ohio, to Denison University just outside of Columbus, where he studied history. After graduating, Riley left the Buckeye State when he received the opportunity to attend the University of



Chicago Law School.

Although Riley was thrilled to have been admitted, he'd never been to Chicago until the day he and his wife Deborah arrived there a few weeks after they were married.

"It was a huge transition for me to be thrown into a place like the University of Chicago Law School, to be surrounded by people, whether it be the faculty members or the student body, with minds like that. Virtually everybody there had achieved something I hadn't before showing up," he says. "It was a real eye-opener to me."

Riley quickly became a standout himself, though, as during his second year he was the Hinton Moot Court Champion. The competition required winning three cases across three different rounds. It included arguing a case before a faculty panel before reaching the finals in front of a panel of real judges.

The judges on the panel were U.S. Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens, 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals Judge Thomas E. Fairchild and Wisconsin Supreme Court Judge Shirley S. Abrahamson.

"It was a good test," Riley says. "For somebody who wanted to be in the well of the courtroom, to be in the ceremonial moot courtroom at the University of Chicago before that panel, as a second-year law student, was a career-defining experience."

Arguing before the faculty panel was no simple test either, as one of its members was Richard Posner, who Riley would go on to argue before again after Posner was appointed to serve on the 7th Circuit.

"It was every bit as difficult to deal with his questions as a practicing lawyer as it was as a law student," Riley says. "He didn't treat me any differently in one setting versus the other."

### FROM THE GROUND FLOOR

Riley knew from the get-go that he wanted to be a trial lawyer, and his focus never once shifted.

"Certainly, nothing I learned in the practice changed that view," he says. "It turns out I wasn't wrong about what I wanted to be."

Riley's first job out of law school ended up being at a firm he'd stay with for over three decades, Schiff Hardin LLP. Riley worked on any kind of litigation he could get his hands on, whether antitrust, commercial or pro bono work in the civil rights area. He practiced under highly regarded litigators like Don McSweeney and Aaron Kramer, who helped to shape him as a trial lawyer.

Riley's focus began to sharpen when a client hired him very early in his career to work on a product liability matter, which was a new area for the firm. At the time, virtually no large law firms had product liability practices, something that has changed dramatically over the past several decades. Riley had the foresight to see that product liability and mass torts would be an area that would grow rapidly, so he began building a team to focus its efforts there.

The work took him around the country trying cases. Asbestos litigation exploded into the largest mass tort in U.S. legal history, and Riley and his colleagues seized the opportunity. They increasingly took on the roles of national counsel and first-chair trial lawyers in consolidated trials that often lasted many months.

Developing this foundation in complex, high-stakes litigation early in his career no doubt proved useful many years later. Following 9/11, Riley led a team defending a "huge array" of lawsuits involving personal injury claims and property damage claims in extensive litigation.

Riley's courtroom leadership resulted in his being asked to serve in various leadership positions at his firm, including service as a practice group leader and as an executive committee member. In 2005, he was elected chairman of the firm, a position he held for 10 years.

"I was able to take on those kinds of responsibilities only because of the team of people with whom I worked. They were, and are, so talented, so able, that I could leverage my time without in any way shorting the clients I continued to serve," he says.

"If you're lucky enough to be part of a team like that, anything is possible, but everybody has to step up. They all did, and they all do to this day."

#### DIFFERENT KIND OF FIRM

The decade when Riley served as firm chairman at Schiff Hardin saw the legal profession as a whole inundated with challenges. Riley notes that sophisticated clients became increasingly demanding, and their expectations were more dynamic. As a result, firms faced—and continue to face—client demands that touch everything from shifting pricing models to authentic diversity.

Firms have responded in various ways, Riley points out, some going global, others expanding regionally, and others simply contracting. In general, however, law firms have been resistant to changing the ways in which they have traditionally done business. Riley believes that can create misalignment and undermine the basic trust relationship between law firms and those they serve.

So, when a group of 21 partners, including Riley, left Schiff Hardin in January 2016 to form their own firm, Riley Safer Holmes & Cancila, they had a clean start from which to build.

"One of the things I thought about at an intellectual level, but didn't fully appreciate until we started to build this law firm, is the power of a blank slate," he says. "You can be what you put up there on the board if you've got the talent and drive and commitment to do it. There's nothing in your way, there's nothing you have to dismantle in order to achieve it."

The group committed to doing things differently. They eliminated internal law firm metrics like mandatory billable hours and "billing attorney credit" that Riley says are misaligned with client service. From the beginning, they were more diverse than other law firms, and they committed to remaining an authentically inclusive workplace at every level, including in the composition of the partnership.

Since they opened their doors in early 2016, the firm has more than tripled in size to more than 70 attorneys—including the addition and expansion of several practice groups and a continued commitment to maintaining a diverse

makeup. More than half of the firm's lawyers are women, and almost 30 percent are minorities.

Riley describes himself as a "lucky guy" for getting to work with the people at RSHC. He points to the accomplishments of founding partners Ron Safer, Joseph Cancila Jr., Holmes and last year's addition of Joseph McCoy, among others, as reasons for the firm's success in its first two years. He also stresses the multigenerational talent at the firm, pointing to Matt Fischer, Ed Casmere, Josh Lee, Meghan McMeel and Brian Watson in his mass torts group as an example.

"We created this law firm because of what we are trying to become, not because of what we are trying to leave behind. Everybody was perfectly successful where they were, but there was something more we wanted to try to accomplish, and the only way we could do it was to build a law firm centered on a shared set of principles designed to serve clients better.

"This is a group of people that had the courage to do that, the conviction to do it," he says. "We are excited about our future, and I couldn't feel better about the people with whom I am privileged to work."

That feeling at RSHC seems to be mutual, as Holmes expresses her gratitude in working alongside Riley. Holmes got to know Riley at their former firm. When she, an African-American woman, had experiences where she wasn't given the respect usually accorded a person with her accomplishments, she says Riley paid close attention.

He became a protector, she says, sometimes calling out the depth of her skill and talent to others, putting her in charge, and being instrumental in helping her to become the first African-American member of Schiff Hardin's executive committee.

#### DOING THE RIGHT THING

"I don't know if I know anybody who is hard-wired the way he is to do the right thing at all times," she says.

"He takes on responsibility, and he won't let it go. If you're going to go through a burning building, you want to go through holding his coattail because he's going to get through the burning building and he's going to make sure you come through, too," she says.

Holmes, who was elected RSHC's first managing partner in April 2018, has appointed Riley as the chair of the firm's strategic vision committee because it was his vision to build the firm, to look ahead at the market, and to see the need for firms to behave differently, she says.

"He's that person who is always looking 10 years down, five years down," she says. "He is going to chair our firm in that way to make sure we stay ahead of the game, to make sure we stay relevant, to make sure we satisfy our clients."

In addition to his leadership role in starting and growing the firm, Holmes points out that

Riley remains a valuable partner to have when it comes to his practice.

"He's got that 'quiver in your boots because he's coming into the case' reputation in the product liability area because he's the man," she says.

Perry Weitz, a partner in the New York law firm of Weitz & Luxenberg, has litigated against Riley numerous times over the past 25 years, during which time they've become friends.

"Bob is one of the best lawyers I ever went up against. He's exceptionally bright, but he also is very understated," Weitz says. "He never overreacts to anything. He's very thoughtful. He's a gentleman. The juries like him."

Weitz jokes that juries and judges also warm up to Riley's Midwestern likability, which makes competing against him even harder.

"He is a very difficult adversary, and so a lot of times, if I could settle with him, I'd settle with him," he says. "He's just one of the best adversaries I've ever met in my career."

Joseph O'Hara, a former vice president and associate general counsel at Owens-Illinois, knows Riley as both a colleague and client. The two were at Schiff Hardin for many years before O'Hara went on to work for Owens-Illinois. He joined RSHC as of counsel in mid-2018.

"Bob Riley is one of those few lawyers who starts his engagements by truly understanding what the client wants and what the client will view as a successful outcome," O'Hara says. "He does this by probing all of the dynamics affecting the client's situation and beginning to define the various options available to find a solution to the client's problems.

"He is humble enough to understand that despite his wealth of experience and his extraordinary track record, it is the client that determines the path forward," O'Hara adds.

As a colleague, O'Hara most admired Riley's "relentlessness and fearlessness." As a client, O'Hara says, Riley's consistent performance at "an elite level" has provided "inestimable value."

"Bob Riley loves the practice of law and genuinely cherishes the honor of clients asking him to represent them," O'Hara says. "He never takes for granted the sacred obligations he accepts as a practicing lawyer and the joys of working with clients to solve their problems.

"He feels blessed having followed in the footsteps of his father whom he revered," O'Hara adds. "He is thankful every day for the many intellectual and interpersonal benefits that emerge from his relationships with his professional colleagues. All of this comes through in his daily work."

Outside of his practice, Riley's focus is on his family, which he describes as "the bedrock of my life." He and his wife of 42 years, Deborah, have five children, Kate, James, John and Connor, and their late son, Daniel. Kate and her husband Paul have one daughter, Zoe. ■