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Matt Addison is helping McDonald Carano emerge as one of Nevada's legal powerhouses, and a real symbol of that state's dynamic future. Back Page

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Forward-Thinking Litigator and Partner Helps Nevada Firm's Reno Office Grow and Flourish

Over the last decade or so, several second-tier cities in the American West have been seeing their populations increase, businesses expand, tourism rise, and levels of technological sophistication grow. Places like Boise, Idaho; Bend, Oregon; and Missoula and Bozeman, Montana have been booming—pre-pandemic at least, and many residents of these cities say they will bounce back when COVID clears, and they will continue to thrive. Perhaps no metro area is positioned as well as Reno, Nevada.

The legal market in Reno has also made great strides, and the Las Vegas-based law firm of MacDonald Carano seems to be leading the way. Born and raised in “The Biggest Little City in the World,” litigator Matt Addison is about to complete the third year of managing the firm’s Reno office and has been pivotal in its market ascendancy and technological innovation. As his website bio puts it, Addison is “helping to guide the firm

into [the] future with a strategic vision aimed at distinguishing the firm as a bold innovator in the legal industry.”

Addison centers his practice on commercial litigation and has run up a stellar track record in representing clients in significant bench and jury trials in city, state, and federal courts, and appeals before the Nevada Supreme Court. He’s also the recipient of numerous honors and recognitions by prominent publications and ranking agencies and serves as an active member of his community.

Recently, *Of Counsel* spoke with Addison about his path into the legal profession, an important case he litigated and won, his likes and dislikes about the profession, his stewardship thus far of the Northern Nevada office, the city in which he’s been a lifelong resident,

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Reno, and other topics. The following is that edited interview.

Of Counsel: Matt, why law? What made you want to become, or inspired you to become, a lawyer?

Matt Addison: The first book I ever received was an American history text from my mom who was a middle school teacher initially. I read it as a four-, five-, and six-year-old kid and looked at the pictures. That's how my mom taught me to read. I've been in love with civics, government, and history—and eventually international relations—from that time forward.

I also had the benefit of some excellent experiences. My mom was the office manager for a law firm for 19 years and, had times been different, she would have been one of the best lawyers. But she was relegated to that role, kind of a private investigator and manager. I worked in the firm. I did everything from revamping their closed filing system to ultimately summarizing depositions for the lawyers. I really enjoyed the interaction with the lawyers.

For instance, I wrote a paper in high school and one of the lawyers helped me with it. It was on immigration issues at the time. He was a Hispanic guy who I liked very much, and he was so intellectual and forward-thinking compared to most people that I had discussed these issues with. I was very impressed with him.

Then in undergrad I stumbled into a job in Century City, California for a law firm that was seven guys who had broken off of a major Chicago-based bankruptcy law firm. I started there as a courier and became a file

clerk and then a paralegal. These guys were so generous, so friendly, and yet they were all brilliant. And of course there were women—women were primarily just coming into the profession at the time and when I say “guys” of course I mean both genders. I had a great experience working in a big Century City law office. I saw the best of the best.

Again, they were incredibly generous to me. In 1988, I made \$17 an hour. They were social; they were very generous in terms of dinners; they had Dodgers tickets that they would give me all the time; and frankly, I spent more time working for them than I did in school. The senior partner wrote me a letter of recommendation to law school, and I thought, *That's where I want to be, with people of this caliber in my profession.*

Road to Litigation via Thanksgiving

OC: Why did you decide to become a litigator?

MA: Well I stumbled into this clerkship with McDonald Carano. A good friend of our family was a partner in the firm, and before my first semester of law school was over, I came home for Thanksgiving. I was invited to dinner at their home and went there and he said, “What are you going to do this coming summer?” I told him I had no idea. He said, “Well, why don't you apply to the firm?” I thought that clerkships were only for second years, but I applied, and I interviewed with a man named Larry Hicks who is now a senior federal court judge.

Larry had been the district attorney in Washoe County before that. In fact, I recalled while he was running in the late 70s for reelection he and his brother actually knocked on my door. I opened it. My parents were not home so I talked with him and his brother. And, I remembered that when I interviewed with him for the clerkship. I got the clerkship, was invited back for my second summer, and

Larry was my mentor. If he's not the most accomplished litigator in Nevada, he's got to be in the top five or 10.

I've never had another job. I have worked at McDonald Carano ever since the summer of 1989. Larry was really influential for me in terms of what I wanted to do because he had been the district attorney at Washoe County. At the time he was the preeminent plaintiff's personal injury attorney in Reno.

One day I was walking by his office and he said, "Matt, come in and sit down so I walked in his office. He was on his speaker phone and he said, "Listen to this." And all of a sudden over the speakerphone I heard, "Mr. Hicks this is Lieutenant Colonel William McAndrew in charge of Marine One. Hold for the president of the United States."

It was George Bush Sr. calling to nominate Larry to the federal court. I was just stunned. George Bush got on the phone and said, "Larry, George Bush here, how are you? I haven't had the pleasure of meeting you but it is my pleasure to nominate you to the United States Federal Court."

It just went on from there. It was this amazing conversation. Ultimately Larry's nomination was pulled when Clinton beat Bush, but then Larry was re-nominated a bit later and ultimately served as a federal court judge and is now a senior court judge.

Larry gave me my first trial within two years and was very, very generous with his time and his investment in me. I tried a case with him at one point and I was hooked. After that, it was my destiny. I attribute my choice of practice area to my direct involvement with Larry Hicks.

Tough Case, Tough Client

OC: When you think of a case that was particularly important or intellectually stimulating or that you've just felt very good about,

what comes to mind? And maybe you could summarize it a little bit.

MA: There is one case that was very formative for me, and it is illustrative of the kind of folks I've had the pleasure of practicing with. I remember it fondly to this day. I was about a four- or five-year lawyer and had a California license. One of our construction clients got in trouble across the line in Truckee and I went up and handled the case for one of our senior partners, John McCune, whom we called Mr. McCune, no one called him John. But what happened in the case was that they made a complicated ERISA preemption argument of California state law, and even the California state judge didn't understand it at first.

The judge ripped me, and my client got me in the parking lot and screamed at me that I had lost them \$800,000 because I hadn't argued the correct things. Well, long story short is, after about six weeks we got the decision and we won. The most important part of the story was, about three or four weeks into it, after I had been taking a lot of grief from the client, the client called Mr. McCune and wanted him to fire me. They were on the speakerphone and they said, "In this case, we need the first team and Matt Addison is the second team. We want him replaced."

Mr. McCune said, "Bob, Matt Addison is the first team and as long as you're working with this law firm you'll work with Matt Addison or no one else, and he will do you right." The client backed down, stayed with me, and I won. I represent that client to this very day."

OC: To shift gears, Matt, what bothers you about being a lawyer? What do you dislike about the legal profession?

MA: It's the stress. When you asked me why I became a litigator, it was partly because I was naïve—very naïve. I remember the first trial I did. My knees were hitting both sides of my pants I was shaking so badly and I had sweat rings down to my belt. It's only gotten more stressful as the years have gone on. Now

I have very significant cases with very significant money on the line and therefore very significant stress. To say that the law is a jealous mistress—it's true. It totally encompasses your life. I've always been an athlete and a martial artist, a hunter, had a lot of outside interests, and a lot of them have gone by the wayside, especially now with the additional responsibility [as the Reno office managing partner]. I would say that's the biggest negative from a practice standpoint.

And there's another thing. There is a state district court judge here in Reno who ruled against one of the major hotel-casinos on two occasions. So the billionaire owner of the hotel-casinos just recently put up hundreds of thousands of dollars to defeat this judge, who was one of our very best—ethical, fair, intelligent, all those things—and he lost re-election. He was defeated by a person with a lot of money who could influence an election and did it. It's a travesty. So justice is not always perfect and the system isn't perfect because it's run by humans who are inherently imperfect. And it hurts your soul when you commit your life to this and then things like that happen because it's not fair and it's not right and there's nothing you can do about it.

When Civility Prevails

OC: I appreciate that answer. What do you like about the legal profession and being a lawyer?

MA: I like all of the latitude that being a lawyer ethically gives you. And by that I mean you are entrusted as a lawyer with so much ability to make the system function well and fairly. When you have a case with another excellent lawyer, it always works out well, and by “well” I mean fairly. A professional, courteous, and an intelligent lawyer on the other side may be a recipe for a heck of a battle but it's also always a recipe for a fair resolution. When the process is fairly conducted between the lawyers, it works. That is really satisfying.

I got off of a call with [an opposing attorney] in Las Vegas just before I got on with you, and it's a very contentious case, but we have treated each other as gentlemen, professionally, civilly throughout the process. I think both of our clients will get a better outcome as a result of our dealings. The ethical rules entrust so much to the lawyers, and I really enjoy that because, in the hands of good people, that makes the system work.

OC: What has been the most difficult challenge you've faced and what brings you satisfaction in managing the attorneys in the Reno office while also maintaining your practice?

MA: The most difficult challenge has been convincing some of the more traditionally minded attorneys to focus and make the firm very forward-looking. I was fortunate enough to have an opportunity to remodel the floor that we're on, condense our space, and save our firm a significant amount of money, but it wasn't necessarily monetarily driven. It was that I know that in the future brick and mortar—I knew this before COVID—that brick-and-mortar-based operations wouldn't necessarily be the most productive.

A lot of our younger folks are so technologically capable, and there are so many women who are mothers as well and are excellent lawyers who want flexible schedules. I knew that that was the future of the practice and I was able to change our office arrangement in Reno to facilitate those kinds of things. COVID has [underscored] where the future of the practice of law will be going, and we were ahead of the curve.

So that's been the most satisfying thing for me because there was considerable pushback from some of the attorneys who preferred the dark wood-paneled offices and the big war rooms and all of those kind of traditional logistical setups that law firms have come to be known by. But we were able to become far more efficient. We got rid of 70% of our paper; we went to smaller offices and office-sharing; and we invested significantly in technology. Fortuitously, COVID hit as we

were completing that process, and it's made our transition to a virtual practice almost painless.

OC: That's both a challenge and a success story.

MA: Thank you. It was a significant amount of luck. I can't take credit for it, but I knew in my heart that's where the practice was going so I pushed it. I took a lot of grief personally as a result, but my predictions have been born out and my planning has been validated. And that has been the most satisfying part.

OC: That approach that you took also aligns with the way that Nevada and Reno have changed and become more technology-centric. How do you see the future of both McDonald Carano and Northern Nevada moving forward in this particular realm, in the technology space?

Reno on the Rise

MA: I'm so optimistic. I say this to everyone who asks me and a lot of folks do. I see Northern Nevada as bubbling right beneath the surface during COVID. For instance, only 10% of our revenue in Northern Nevada

results from gaming. We have transitioned Northern Nevada from a divorce capital and gaming center to this remarkably advanced technological place. When COVID subsides and a vaccine is available I see our city and region as absolutely exploding. And, I want us to be at the forefront of that. We have fantastic lawyers, and we're ready. Our business has never been better.

We have been the extraordinary beneficiaries of this influx of highly intellectual, highly educated, highly motivated folks and businesses from California that have rejuvenated Reno and really brought it forward.

With all these businesses, we have people who want modern transportation and great schools for their kids and great jobs. Yet, they love the things we have to offer in terms of the outdoors and the proximity to Lake Tahoe and so on. This massive influx in, I'd say the last eight to 10 years, has just set up the community for enormous growth, and yet wisely planned growth and a technologically oriented future. It's not just because I'm from Reno and love Reno and will be in Reno my whole life and will probably only have one job, at McDonald Carano, my entire career; it's that I honestly see things that bright for Northern Nevada. ■

—Steven T. Taylor