

# Cisco Connell

## Experience as Former Chicago Police Officer Benefits Business Lawyer and His Clients

by Dustin J. Seibert

Not many careers better prepare one to become a lawyer than being an officer of the law. Lawyers and police officers often exist in both sides of the same world, and frequently they share the same parlance.

Indeed, the nearly 10 years that Francisco E. Connell spent as a Chicago Police officer prepared him for his career change. It offered an up-close experience of what it's like to be on the other side.

"As police officers, we spend time in court often," Connell says. "We're direct examined, cross examined, and prepped as witnesses in criminal and civil cases. So I got to see the action of lawyers in the courtroom. I thought it was interesting and said, 'Hell, I can do this.'"

"Being a police officer was fun, especially when I was 25 and out of the academy and could run and catch most guys," he laughs.



"Now, if someone ran from me, it would be like, 'Take whatever you want.'"

Connell doesn't have to do a lot of running in his position as a principal at **Chuhak & Tecson, P.C.**, where he's been making a name for himself for seven years in banking work, including bankruptcy litigation. It's his second legal job since leaving the police force.

He traded the squad car and Chicago streets for a high-rise office, but Connell has kept the disarming, gregarious personality of a man who spent many years in public service.

"I don't fit the mold of your typical firm litigator. That probably has its pluses and minuses," he admits.

The relationships Connell has maintained for years evince his "everyman" demeanor.

Consider Alex Peric, a local entrepreneur who utilizes Connell as counsel for all of his business matters. Peric has known Connell since he was 10 years old. At that age, Connell worked for Peric in his landscaping business.

"I bumped into him five years ago and hadn't seen him in a while," Peric says. "He told me he was a lawyer, and I hired

him on the spot. He's a wonderful person and a hard worker."

Connell has also helped Peric's son, Alex Jr., a competitive bass fisherman, establish an LLC once he started receiving sponsorships and money from his YouTube videos.

"My son had a great time setting things up with him," Peric adds.

### A Different Path

Connell, a native of Chicago's Northwest Side, had designs on becoming an architect as a child — a dream that was dashed. "(I) quickly realized in undergrad that I didn't have the requisite artistic talent.

"The best architects had a rare gift for creativity that I don't think I possessed," he says. "I still love it, but I don't possess that particular talent."

His interest in law enforcement came from reading when he was young ("All the good books are crime books," he says). It became solidified when he became a lifeguard on Chicago's lakefront.

"If you ask a lot of firemen and policemen, a good number of them were

lifeguards for the Chicago Park District,” he says. “It’s that first responder mentality, and I always liked helping people.

“It agrees with me because I tend to be more on the calm side. First responders have to be composed because situations are so inflamed, the last thing they need is someone else going into panic mode.”

Connell enrolled in the academy as an undergraduate at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Though he was doing a fulfilling job when he graduated, he knew that he wanted to further his education. His marriage to his wife, Britt, and the desire to start a family were certainly motivating factors.

“I just didn’t know what to do,” he admits. “I was either going to get my master’s or move on to a Ph. D., and I had the motivation for both. But I’m a practical guy, and I recognized school is time and money and that I needed a return on my investment. Pure efficiency was what I had in mind...getting the most bang for my buck.”

Connell ultimately decided on a law degree because of its inclusive nature.

“I know a lot of people with a law degree who don’t practice law,” he says. “Master’s degrees tend to have more specialized subject matter and don’t necessarily allow for that broadness.”

### Getting Past the Fear

Connell entered Loyola University Chicago School of Law with the idea of pursuing transactional law at the very least. He says part of his initial reticence to pursue trial work came from an admitted fear of public speaking.

His friend Raymond Hamilton, a fellow Chicago Police officer also in law school with him, convinced Connell to try out for the law school’s moot court. They both made the team, setting him down his career path.

“Generally speaking, law school beats out of you the whole stage fright thing quickly,” Connell says. “In a fairly quick fashion, the way (the professors) carry the class, you’re constantly on stage arguing and putting people on the spot. Some people do better than others.”

Connell started law school part-time in 2002 and finished in 2006, having had his first two children during that time. After graduation, he and Hamilton started their own firm, Connell & Hamilton, doing real estate work and handling other matters while still police officers.

One evening, Hamilton’s former partner was hanging out with Connell at a bar

when he mentioned that he knew of a firm looking for attorneys. Connell passed his resume on. His first law firm job followed, at Querrey & Harrow Ltd.

“It was nothing I planned or saw coming,” Connell says. “These type of things happened all the time, and nothing comes of it, but the stars just aligned.”

At Querrey & Harrow, Connell did primarily bankruptcy litigation, a portion of his current practice. The position motivated Connell to take an official leave of absence from the police department for one year — from which he never returned or looked back.

“I love helping clients through the system, both arguing cases and the writing part,” he says.

“Sometimes the writing can be trying, but I do get engrossed by it and enjoy the final product.”

Connell also enjoys the “exhilaration of trying cases and putting witnesses on.” It’s perhaps the signature aspect of his enjoyment in practicing law.

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“To me, it’s like ‘Perry Mason’...It’s what we grew up seeing,” he says. “You don’t think about being a lawyer so you can review policy manuals...There are no television shows about that.”

Unlike Connell, Hamilton never left law enforcement. He is currently chief deputy director for the Cook County Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management. Though Hamilton no longer works with Connell in a professional capacity, the two remain friends.

“One of the reasons he was such a good and effective officer is because he’s so service oriented,” Hamilton says. “He never lost sight of the fact that he’s serving the community. His experience as a police officer helped him be a much more effective attorney.”

### Never Going Back

Connell’s current practice concentrates on banking law and litigation. However, he enjoys working with small and midsized businesses in a variety of areas, including corporate, employment and real estate matters.

Chuhak & Tecson’s wide-ranging practice areas provide a platform for him to offer these services to his diverse pool of clients.

His focus on civil law is a manifestation of his adamant desire to distance himself from the difficulties of policing Chicago’s streets. Connell had left the street before he was done with the force and was assigned to a technology unit prior to leaving entirely.

“Several years on the street chasing guys around, seeing fellow officers sued and having to go to depositions — it just wore me out a bit,” he says.

“Granted, a lot of guys go to law school, get into criminal law, and they have a leg up because they know the whole system. It’s a natural progression for others, but I was looking for something different, which is why I left in the first place.”

It was a drastic life change that he doesn’t miss for the most part, and neither does his wife.

“She was ecstatic,” he laughs. “I remember asking her, and she was like, ‘Where do we sign?’”

Connell channels the same enthusiasm he had for public service into his lawyerly capacity. He says many of his clients have had attorneys in the past who they claimed didn’t demonstrate Connell’s dedication to client service.

“They express their happiness and the feeling that I’m treating them differently than they’ve been treated in the past,” he says.

“You know how your closest friends are people you can trust, even behind your back? And you know how they will do anything for you? That’s how I feel about my best and most established clients, and I know that’s how they feel about me. I’m a very camaraderie-driven person.”

Lisa Diaz, assistant general counsel for financial services company Northern Trust, also attended law school with Connell and has utilized him as outside counsel for a number of matters.

“Cisco is the total package,” Diaz says. “He’s a good writer and a great advocate in court; he has the ability to read his opponents and determine if he should take a tough, hardline position or a different approach, but he always meets his opponents in kind.”

“At the end of the day, no matter what he does, Cisco always represents his clients well.” ■