

JAMIE STEVENS

Problem Solving Is Key to His Success in Condominium Law

by Dave Argentar



emerging lawyers

It was a time of tension and crisis. Heated rhetoric, competing interests and long-simmering feuds had brought the parties to the brink of all-out conflict. Diffusing the situation and achieving a peaceful resolution would require deft negotiation, forceful advocacy and an ability to understand and reconcile seemingly incompatible viewpoints. And all before final exams.

“I’ve always been a politely argumentative debate nerd, which is why I got involved in Model United Nations from day one of high school and continued all the way through college,” says James “Jamie” R. Stevens, a principal at Chuhak & Tecson, P.C.

“The arguments, the quest for solutions, fixing things that were broken—all of the same inclinations that sort of hard-wired me for a legal career.”

Instead of preventing global conflagration, Stevens, 35, now focuses his prodigious energy on resolving the conflicts, crises and challenges that regularly confront his condominium and common interest community association clients. He finds the practice endlessly

fascinating and a perfect fit for both his advocacy and problem-solving proclivities.

“Condo and community association law is at this wonderful intersection of litigation and transactional work,” he says. “I still love the rush of courtroom arguments, but it’s also really rewarding to come into dysfunctional situations, identify disconnects and disputes, help people see eye to eye, and get them back on a positive and productive track.”

GOING TO WAR AND MAKING PEACE

That combination of fierce litigator and dogged peacemaker is what left a lasting impression on Cook County Judge Pamela Hughes Gillespie, who presided over a large, complex and contentious forced condominium conversion case in which Stevens played a vital role.

“Mr. Stevens stepped into this case years after it was filed, but his contribution to the case’s ultimate resolution was substantial,” Gillespie says. “I was pleased that he joined the case because it really facilitated its final settlement.”

Gillespie was struck by Stevens’ demeanor

and skill in the courtroom and how it contrasted with and complemented his conciliatory and amiable approach when dealing with a diverse—and often difficult—group of litigants and opposing counsel.

“He was always so professional, prepared and formal that when someone referred to him as ‘Jamie’ I had to ask who they were talking about,” Gillespie recalls. “He clearly has a ‘court face’ that he uses very effectively, and certainly that ‘face’ was called for in this case.”

But what the case also called for was an ability to reconcile many conflicting viewpoints to reach a positive outcome. Stevens was more than up to the task in this respect as well, Gillespie says.

“The courtroom was always packed with lawyers and many folks who represented themselves, and Mr. Stevens was front and center,” she remembers. “He responded ably, thoroughly and respectfully to questions from everyone from seasoned lawyers to irate seniors. I was most impressed with how patiently he worked with some of the more persistent ex-condo owners.”

GROWING UP WITH A WORLD OF VIEWS

That patience in the face of persistence and that ability to reconcile diverse points of view are products of Stevens’ upbringing in Durham, North Carolina. Stevens’ mom was born and raised in Kansas, and his dad was an Englishman. They met at Duke University, where they were both academics. As transplants to the area, they became close friends with fellow transplants hailing from around the globe.

“I grew up with this extended family that my folks have known for nearly 50 years now,” Stevens says. “We would spend the holidays together and go on vacations to the beach a couple of times a year.”

This “family,” in addition to parents who came from wildly different backgrounds, exposed Stevens to a literal world of opinions and perspectives.

“What I remember most was that they all had unique upbringings, education and experiences,” he recalls. “They had had so many ways of looking at things, and they argued and approached issues in distinct styles, which always made for fascinating times together.”

This cacophony of lively and congenial debate stuck with Stevens and carried over into his condo and community association work.

“A condo board can have eight people and 16 different opinions,” he notes. “Being able to synthesize these competing viewpoints and address each board member’s individual concerns with actionable, helpful information is often the key to getting a board back on track and a problem resolved. Having grown up listening to a rich diversity of views certainly helps me do that.”

Of course, Stevens did more than just listen. From a young age, his proclivity for advocacy—on his own behalf—was well-developed.

“I was a kid who wouldn’t take no for an answer without a thorough explanation after advocating for my point,” he says with a laugh. “As an only child, there weren’t a lot of folks to debate with except for the bosses, so you work with your parents to make your positions known and advocate for yourself pretty early on.”

In addition to his love of argument and debate, Stevens also had an innate interest in politics which led to an impactful high school internship with then-U.S. Senator John Edwards. Pretty soon, the inevitable political science major made his way to the Midwest, where he attended the University of Chicago.

IF IT’S BROKE, FIX IT

It was there that Stevens’ affinity for problem solving once again came to the fore. Continuing with his involvement in Model UN, Stevens arrived in Hyde Park to find the university’s college conference in need of some reorganization. It was the kind of challenge Stevens always seemed to gravitate toward.

“In both high school and college, I would get involved in student organizations and start working on fixing problems where I saw them,” Stevens says. “The Model UN college conference at U. of C. had a huge operating deficit that threatened the viability of the conference. I immediately got to work trying to dig us out of that hole, and we were able to steady and strengthen the program for years to come. I love finding a way to put things back together and make them right.”

Fixing what’s broken is at the heart of what Stevens does in his common interest community association practice, and the way he goes about doing so is what makes him so effective, says Lauren Peddinghaus, owner of Haus Financial Services, a condominium management company and Stevens’ client for more than a decade.

“Jamie has a great ability to diffuse situations with his demeanor, calming things down rather than escalating conflict,” Peddinghaus says. “Even during the middle of a trial, he will continue trying to speak with the other side to find solutions. He has an impressive way of getting along with people so they feel like they are partners in solving a problem rather than enemies.”

BUILDING A CONDO PRACTICE

Like many future attorneys, Stevens grew up hearing remarks from friends and family about how he would make a good lawyer.

“My friends would say, ‘You put a quarter in Jamie, he’ll start talking. If you run out of time, put another quarter in and he’ll keep on talking,’” Stevens says.

So, Stevens left the South Side of Chicago for Case Western Reserve University School of Law in Cleveland, where he dove into moot court and the school’s legal clinic with gusto. He spent his first summer of law school working in the City of Chicago’s building and land use enforcement division. He got an early taste of the issues and dynamics involved with troubled buildings as well as the troubles of the competing people and interests affected by the outcome of such proceedings.

Stevens returned to Chicago after law school and continued to hone his knowledge and skills in common interest community law. After a few years of practice, Stevens launched his own firm with a friend, an experience Stevens says was rewarding and exciting but one he has no desire to reprise.

“It was an exhilarating time, but I learned I don’t want to be responsible for buying paper or changing toner,” Stevens says. “I’m very happy just focusing on my clients and my actual work. I don’t feel the need to run a business anymore; I prefer helping my clients’ run theirs.”

He and his law partner amicably parted after two years, and Stevens continued building his practice at other Chicago firms. At one of these firms, he met a partner of a different kind—his wife Brooke, a white-collar defense attorney.

“We started dating, and let’s say I knew from day one I wanted to be on the partnership track,” Stevens jokes.

Stevens and Brooke got married this past summer after a lengthy engagement (“It was a very deliberative process.”) They live in Chicago’s Lakeview neighborhood, a stone’s throw from Wrigley Field.

“I admit it’s a weird choice for a Sox fan,” he notes.

Stevens’ career journey led him to Chuhak

& Tecson two years ago. He found a practice group committed to fusing its vast historical knowledge of condominium and community interest association law with a forward-looking perspective about where the law is headed.

“At Chuhak, we’ve put together a team with long and consistent institutional knowledge about the law, our clients or a given property. History is the great context which unites us all,” Stevens says. “At the same time, we had the goal of putting together a multi-generational practice which not only understands that history but also anticipates what the future holds for our clients whether legally, technologically or otherwise. I’m proud to say we’ve done that.”

Stevens has developed a particularly strong practice in condominium deconversions and receiverships. He says Chuhak’s vast reservoir of legal talent in a wide range of practice areas outside of condo law helps him better serve his clients.

“In condominium work, I sort of operate as an out-of-house general counsel, which means I get asked about all kinds of matters beyond deconversions, receiverships and the like,” Stevens says.

“A unit owner passes away and there may be a probate case, or a dispute arises with a maintenance worker which raises employment law issues. I was looking for and found a place with more focused capabilities when needed to assist my clients with the full range of problems that can come up in a condo context.”

Solving those problems is what drives Stevens, and being a really nice guy enhances his ability to do so, says attorney David Freeman, who worked with and mentored Stevens at a previous firm.

“Jamie is no doubt a terrific lawyer, very good with clients in that he understands what they need, knows how to communicate with them about their situation and options, and gets them where they should be,” Freeman says.

“But the bonus with Jamie is he gets along with pretty much everyone. He’s a very personable guy in addition to being whip-smart. Combine the two and you have someone who you want as your attorney as well as someone who you’re lucky to have as a colleague and friend.” ■



From left: David J. Bloomberg and James R. Stevens of Chuhak & Tecson; Gregory Janes, Chicago’s senior counsel for Buildings and License Enforcement