

FRIDAY, AUGUST 21, 2015

LAW FIRM BUSINESS

Underdog Mentality

The grandson of a small business entrepreneur, Richard K. Bridgford exudes the underdog spirit as founder of Newport Beach-based plaintiffs' firm Bridgford, Gleason & Artinian.

By Deirdre Newman
Daily Journal Staff Writer

NEWPORT BEACH — Much of Richard K. Bridgford's work ethic can be attributed to his family, and more specifically his grandfather, Hugh H. Bridgford, who started Bridgford Foods Corp. in 1932 in San Diego and, with the help of other relatives, ultimately built it into a worldwide business.

Childhood memories of his family's small business having to compete against larger, multi-national corporations instilled in Bridgford a strong sense of defending the underdog.

"I developed a very refined sense of life's injustices," he said. "That, and being the youngest male of 14 cousins, made me a fighter."

Coming from a family of entrepreneurs, yet fiercely independent, the trial attorney started his own law firm at age 30. Bridgford & Associates opened its doors in Newport Beach in 1990 and went through several incarnations before eventually settling as Bridgford, Gleason & Artinian.

Though it first started out defending large developers, the firm switched gears after about five years and started doing more plaintiff work, which Bridgford said is closer in alignment with his core values. The firm's practice areas include business litigation; real estate; insurance and bad faith; personal injury and wrongful death; employment; and construction defect.

Headquartered in Orange County, the firm also has a satellite office in Los Angeles that handles consumer-protection suits on a joint-venture basis with plaintiffs attorney Patrick McNicholas of McNicholas & McNicholas LLP.

McNicholas describes Bridgford's firm as "a unique combination of intellectual horsepower, exceptional skill and years of courtroom experience."

"Over the years McNicholas & McNicholas has engaged Bridgford, Gleason & Artinian on a variety of contingency-fee cases because they always add huge value to the case," McNicholas said. "They are uniquely situated in the market, and especially in Orange County, to provide clients with the best possible outcome."

Bridgford traces his easy rapport with jurors and clients from all walks of life



Alexander Drecun/Special to the Daily Journal

From left, Bridgford, Gleason & Artinian name partners John S. Gleason, Richard K. Bridgford and Michael H. Artinian.

to selling bread dough and deli meats to supermarket chains, restaurants and hotels starting at age 16. The street credibility and approachability he fostered with working-class people was easily transferable to the courtroom, he said. He often feels more comfortable with jurors than fellow lawyers, he conceded.

"No one in my family was a lawyer and I knew very few lawyers [when I first started out]," he said.

Bridgford started his firm as a sole practitioner, getting a lot of help early on from attorney Paul R. Hamilton after working for Hamilton & Samuels in Orange County for three years. Hamilton offered Bridgford a partnership after having been a lawyer for only five years, but Bridgford decided instead to start his own firm.

A year into his small firm, Bridgford brought on attorney John S. Gleason as partner, and in 2008 was joined by Michael H. Artinian. In total, there are five full-time attorneys at the firm.

Gleason, like Bridgford, had big-firm experience but craved independence and more trial experience. Some of his practice areas include securities litigation and eminent domain. He said he appreciates the opportunity to work and brainstorm with Bridgford, which results in "innovative claims and defenses for our clients."

Gleason wrote, argued and won the landmark decision of *Furla v. Jon Douglas*. This real estate fraud case centered on the misrepresentation by a broker of the square footage of a home in Los

Angeles. Gleason's argument honed in on the fact that even an "as is" clause and a disclaimer do not relieve a seller of the duty to not misrepresent or conceal material facts.

Artinian also desired more trial experience and found plenty of opportunity at Bridgford's firm. His areas of specialty include insurance and bad faith, construction defect, business litigation and employment.

Since joining Bridgford and eventually becoming partner, Artinian has tried several cases, including a series of current class actions over copper pipe pinhole leaks, which he co-leads with Bridgford.

"Rich has a keen ability for identifying key issues in a case early on," Artinian said. "He is a quick study, and is very involved in every case we take on together."

The copper pipe leaks in the Ladera Ranch enclave of Orange County spawned a series of class actions against 10 home builders in 2013. These lawsuits were atypical as far as copper pipe leak litigation goes because Bridgford decided not to sue the water districts, as many developers have done, alleging that chemicals in the water cause the leaks.

Artinian called this decision "prophetic," as Judge Thierry P. Colaw, who is presiding over the Ladera Ranch class actions just ruled against Shappell Industries Inc. and two homeowners associations, which sued the Moulton Niguel Water District.

Instead, Bridgford's firm went after homebuilders like MBK Homes LLC and William Lyon Homes. In early August, Bridgford's firm received final approval on the first class settlement of the series: a \$1.3 million deal with MBK. A second settlement with Lyon for roughly \$7.1 million received preliminary approval in July and is scheduled for a final approval hearing in December.

The rest of the eight class actions were on hold pending decisions in two of the cases, one against K. Hovnanian Companies LLC and the other against D.R. Horton Inc. In both cases, the homebuilders contested the certification of the class and prevailed on demurrer, but Bridgford's firm appealed. On Aug. 19, the appellate court sided with Bridgford, sending both class actions back to the trial court to certify the classes. These two cases affect 2,500 to 3,000 homeowners, and perhaps more than 8,000 more in other locales, Bridgford said.

Bridgford has obtained numerous six- and seven-figure verdicts and awards over the years. In terms of settlements, one of the most meaningful results was winning a \$5 million settlement in a catastrophic personal injury case, the largest amount for a wrongful death claim among those killed in the 2003 Metrolink train crash. This catalyzed Bridgford to advocate for the state and federal governments to expedite the requirement of automatic braking technology for trains operating on the West Coast, as it's already more prevalent on the East Coast.

One of the biggest challenges his firm faces is the perception about the plaintiffs bar, Bridgford said. This rankles him, he confessed, but he copes by doing his part to change that perception by giving back to the community, which he considers an obligation of the well-off. As part of his philanthropic efforts, he serves as a trustee on the UCI Law Advisory Board. He encourages giving back among his partners and associates as well.

"Money's always a challenge, hard work is always a challenge, but to me the biggest challenge as you grow older is you want your life to have meaning," he said. "And I feel that what we do is very important and it does have meaning and we've made the world a better place and we've forced changes that are positive."