

ERIC ROBERSON

Work Ethic Leads to Successful Real Estate and Banking Practice

by Ruth Kaufman



Eric M. Roberson, of counsel at Boodell & Domanskis, LLC, learned about the importance of a strong work ethic while growing up in Washington, Illinois, on the east side of the river from Peoria.

His father worked at nearby Illinois Central College first as a counselor, then dean, then vice president. His mother was an elementary teacher and then dean of a high school. After she obtained her administrative certificate, she was the principal of the school at Illinois River Correctional Center.

Both of Roberson's siblings are lawyers. His younger brother, Keith, is one of Caterpillar's in-house intellectual property attorneys in Peoria. His older brother, Lance, handles document review and maintains a solo law practice.

During Roberson's childhood, he belonged to one of the two black families in their town of around 8,000. There were no other people of color in his class until his junior year of high school. Even then, there were only a few.

"That was good training for being in the corporate world," Roberson says. "Being the only person of color in the room didn't bother me."

In high school, Roberson availed himself of many opportunities to get involved. He played

football all four years as an offensive lineman and also threw shot put for the track team. He lettered in both sports in his junior and senior years. For two years he also wrestled before giving it up for the speech and debate team.

He also made time to serve as president of the National Honor Society and to play drums in the concert band. When he was a senior, his school's football team went to the state playoffs for the first time. They finished second in the 4A bracket.

He chose Bradley University for college for two reasons. First, his mother, aunt, and both brothers attended the school, and his mother and father earned their master's degrees there. Second, he was able to save money by living at home.

When Roberson was a sophomore, his step-mother, Nickie, became a recruiter there. He majored in civil engineering for one semester. During one summer job as an IDOT materials tester, he ensured that concrete was properly mixed and cured.

REAL ESTATE, BANKING, HOUSING

Roberson had a change of heart about his studies and switched to a psychology major instead, eventually graduating *cum laude*.

When considering an advanced degree, Roberson decided law school would cost less than graduate school in psychology and that he could make more money in the long run as a lawyer. He chose the University of Illinois College of Law in Urbana-Champaign because it was a Top 20 school at the time.

He was notes editor and proofed articles for the Recent Decisions column in the *Illinois Bar Journal*. He served as vice president of the Black Law Students Association during his second and third years.

During the summer after his first year, Roberson clerked at Kavanagh Scully in Peoria. He was a summer associate at Chapman and Cutler LLP in Chicago for his second summer. After receiving offers from both firms upon graduation, Roberson accepted Chapman and Cutler's so he could stay in Chicago.

Roberson started as an associate in real estate. When his group broke up in the mid-1990s after the practice group leader retired, he moved to banking because he'd been working with that department anyway and the work tied into what he was already doing — making loans to national and regional home builders and developers. In 2000, he made partner.

While at Chapman, he served for six years on

the board of The Cathedral Shelter of Chicago, now called Revive Center for Housing and Healing. He was also treasurer for a year.

Roberson did considerable pro bono work mostly for non-profit community development organizations. He also handled a lot of loan documentation for the Chicago Community Loan Fund.

“I got to know a lot of folks in the affordable housing community,” he says.

With the economy tanking in 2008, single-family homes were no longer selling well. Many of his clients, including banks and property developers, went away. He left Chapman and spent three years doing document review. Then he got lucky.

Roberson heard that Urban Partnership Bank, a Chicago-based community bank, was looking for additional counsel to do loan documentation. He joined as a contractor. In three months, he was offered an assistant general counsel position.

“It was still essentially the same work, so the learning curve wasn’t too steep. The things I needed to learn were things like typing my own documents,” Roberson says.

He also learned some of the regulatory and business aspects of banking. As director of legal services for his last 1½ years at the bank, he had only one direct report: the CEO.

In January 2019, his bank was acquired by another that didn’t have in-house counsel, so his position was about to be eliminated.

CONNECTING WITH BOODELL & DOMANSKIS

“What I learned from my last foray into not being employed was that unless you’re currently working, people won’t even look at your résumé.” Roberson made sure he had some lead time before leaving the bank.

He happened to attend an in-house counsel conference and used that to his advantage by networking with attendees, including some from Boodell & Domanskis. As it happens, the law firm had been one of the bank’s providers of outside counsel, as the bankers were allowed to choose which lawyers they wanted to use. So, Roberson had already worked with some people at the firm.

He left the bank at the end of February 2019. The next Monday, he started his of counsel position at Boodell & Domanskis, where he’d do the same work he’d been doing — primarily commercial real estate acquisition and disposition, and also preparing loan documentation and corporate governance documentation.

“It’d be nice to continue to have a home here. Boodell has a good team, with practical lawyers,” Roberson says. “There’s a lot to be said for that. Sometimes lawyers can ‘over lawyer’ things. They can get lost among the weeds and lose the focus of what their goal is

and what they were doing to begin with.”

Roberson values simplifying complicated topics when possible to get to the heart of the matter and convey what’s important. “‘What does this actually mean?’ If someone has to ask you that, then maybe you’ve overlawyered something.”

Chapman was a practical firm as well, Roberson says. “I’ve had the good luck to be working with practical lawyers.”

Steven N. Zaris, a partner at McCarthy Duffy LLP, was a senior associate at Chapman when he first met Roberson. They worked in the same departments for around 10 years as he went up the ladder from associate to partner.

“He was everything you would want in a young associate—a hard worker and a quick study.”

Zaris had some supervisory roles and reviewed Roberson’s work product on some projects, including some banking matters. Their largest client at the time was the credit enhancement group of a large insurance company for which they handled letters of credit and bonds.

“Eric had experience working on a broad range of deals generally centered on finance. But he had to master a lot of aspects of the real estate universe, as it tends to be a service department. He got the job done and is smart and hardworking. And he was able to keep the partners in all those other departments happy,” Zaris says.

Steve Hampson, a director at management consulting firm Guidehouse LLP, went to high school and played football with Roberson.



Roberson and his mother, Sandra Roberson, in Botswana in 2013 in a delegation with Peoria’s mayor trying to establish a sister city, Jwaneng



March 2018 U of I Black Law Student Association alumni dinner. Back, from left: Darwin Brown, Gerald McCarthy, Samuel Mendenhall, Paul Robertson, Brian Ellis; front, from left: Kevin Shaw, Roberson



With girlfriend Tonia Duke

“For more than 30 years, he’s been a good friend, and we’ve done a little work together as well. Eric is a super guy and very reliable. The nice thing about the work I’ve done with him is that he understands law very well and knows how to apply it to real world situations. Some lawyers understand theories but can’t use the theory to help solve your challenges. He’s very good at breaking it down to help solve problems.

HELPING PEOPLE REACH AGREEMENTS

“Eric is very reliable and timely. His bedside manner, if you will, is very good. He understands that not everyone is a legal scholar, so you need to be able to break topics down for the rest of the masses and explain things in a way it doesn’t take a law degree to understand.”

The two enjoy supporting a lot of Chicago’s sports teams and have watched the Bears and Blackhawks play during the same weekend. In 2000, they attended the Super Bowl together, reinforcing their decades-old common bond of playing on the same football team.

Roberson’s practice areas include banking, finance and real estate. He drafts a wide range of agreements including forbearance, loan modification, note sale, subordination, inter-creditor and real estate purchase and sale agreements on behalf of lenders. He also negotiates syndicated credit transactions and participation agreements and commercial real estate agreements, among others. He is a member of the Illinois State Bar Association and the Chicago Bar Association

Because Roberson gets enough non-fiction at work, he enjoys reading fiction, especially spy novels and thrillers. Favorite authors include Nelson DeMille. He’s also a runner, though he sticks to the treadmill. Another hobby is travel. He prefers warm venues, like most vacation spots in Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean, but his girlfriend



With friend Steve Hampson

doesn’t like flights of over five hours.

They met at a fundraiser for St. Ignatius College Prep, a selective private, coeducational Jesuit high school on Chicago’s Near West Side. Roberson attended because a friend from law school had gone there. He ended up talking to a woman and hitting it off. His friend said, “We were going to introduce you, but I looked over and saw you already talking to her.”

The event was the Friday before Memorial Day. His mother always traveled out of town for the Memorial Day holiday. Despite enjoying talking with the woman who is now his girlfriend, he didn’t get her phone number since he left the event early to talk to his mother before she left. So, she tracked his number down via their mutual friends. She thought it was sweet that he was so concerned about his mother, and knew he was a keeper.

His mother’s work ethic continued to influence Roberson as an adult. She couldn’t sit still after she retired. She’d look online to find delegations traveling to various countries that she could join. In October 2013, he availed himself of the opportunity to go to Africa at a lower cost and accompanied her to Botswana.

One purpose of the delegation, which stemmed from the friendship of Peoria’s then-mayor with the then-Botswana ambassador to the United States, was to assess whether Peoria would establish a sister-city relationship with a city in Botswana. Opportunities for business ties already existed because a diamond mine there used Caterpillar equipment. He met many dignitaries during days of meetings and participated in his first motorcade.

IMPORTANCE OF STAYING IN TOUCH

One thing that people may not know about Roberson is that he has a pretty good sense of humor. “Cynicism is a hobby of mine,” he says.

“My goal is to make things understandable, readable and explainable, and still get it done in a cost-effective fashion. I protect my clients without padding a bill.”

Sean T. Maloney, a partner who practices finance, public finance and restructuring at Schiff Hardin LLP, says Roberson is “an experienced and very practical lawyer who’s really easy to get along with.”

“I recruited him as a summer associate decades ago at Chapman. We were in the same group. I think the world of the guy,” he says.

Maloney adds, “He’s not afraid to work hard and is very task- and goal-oriented. Eric made hard work enjoyable no matter how hard we were working.”

As friends, they get together regularly. “But not regularly enough,” Maloney says.

As colleagues, they bounce questions off each other from time to time. “I value his opinion very much and couldn’t think of a better person to have on a deal team.”

Over the years, Roberson has experienced a range of Chicago’s neighborhoods and environs. He first lived on the Gold Coast and then relocated to Lakeview. After getting married, he moved to Elgin because his then-wife worked in Rockford. He returned to the city after his divorce and now lives in East Ukrainian Village.

Despite his successes and achievements, Roberson says every day has been a struggle to avoid doubting himself.

“It’s easy for people to make you doubt your ability and what you think, and it takes a lot to not make that happen. I’ve learned to ignore the chatter. Perhaps you have to get to a certain age to be able to stop listening to some of the nonsense.”

The best advice he’s received so far in his career has been to prioritize and stay organized. “If you don’t, the work can get away from you, adding to an already stressful job.”

And what advice would he offer others? “If I had to go back and talk to someone starting in the law or who was a first-year student, I’d talk about marketing and networking. You’ve got to continue to stay in touch with people you went to school with, go to bar functions and fundraisers. That’s what will sustain you in the long run.”

Zaris left Chapman in 2001, but Roberson’s people skills were so good that he wanted to stay in touch.

“He played a leadership role at the bank when he was there, which wouldn’t have surprised me given his work ethic, his smarts, but especially his people skills,” Zaris says. “I think of Eric as being in the upper echelon of lawyers I’ve worked with.

“So, to the extent that this publication is literally *Leading Lawyers*, I think he’s a perfect fit.” ■