

The Skilled Negotiator Heads to Law School

Based on an interview of Alan Shachter by Alissa N. Hudson in December 2015

Alan Shachter was born, raised and educated in Philadelphia. He holds a Bachelor's Degree in History from the University of Pennsylvania and a Master's Degree in European History from Temple. His first job following graduate school was as a revenue officer for the IRS. His first assignment post was in Erie, PA, and following a six month stint in the Army, he returned to the IRS and was moved to Altoona, PA where he applied for a program designed to explore various administrative functions in the central office. Shachter was then moved to IRS Administration in Washington, DC. He was initially a recruiter and ultimately assigned to labor relations.

After some time with the IRS, the Treasury Department's Assistant Director of Personnel was looking for an assistant to handle labor relations and Shachter fit the bill. The Treasury Department, at this time, included the IRS; Customs; the Mint; Engraving and Printing; the Commissioner of Revenue; Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms; the Secret Service and the Coast Guard. It was a tremendous opportunity for Shachter to hone his skills as a negotiator with labor relations and unions. While working for Treasury, Shachter started attending George Washington Law School at night, graduating in 1972. Leo Scolforo was a classmate of his. Shachter was well liked at Treasury and they offered him a promotion to stay, but he "decided if I took it, I would never practice law."

Shachter began looking at surrounding counties to find the one with the "least number of lawyers that was growing the quickest. That was Prince William County." Before committing to the area, he took a "trip out here to see what was going on, and walked in off the street across from the old courthouse...and met Pete Steketee." They talked about what it "was like here to practice law and what's the Bar like." Shachter decided this would be a good place to land. As a solo practitioner who started from a home based office, (zoning laws were different then), Shachter was fortunate in that while he was building a general practice, he was also hired by both the Library of Congress and the Plate Printers Union to assist with labor negotiations, which provided a steady stream of income while his local caseload increased. In the early days, he did "a lot of criminal work, a lot of court-appointed work" and picked up cases from his neighbors who would stop by while he was working in the yard, just to ask a question.

He joined the PWC Bar soon after arriving. It was a small association then, around 70 members, and he recalls the meetings were fun because "people were always arguing about something." It seems the meetings provided a great forum for the proffering and disputing of issues related to the daily practice of law. When asked who he admired in the early days of his practice, Shachter recalls Tom Palmer, Bill Stephens and Jim Robeson. "They were really good lawyers...solid guys." He also admired Judge Arthur Sinclair, "Just an absolute gem. Great judge. Great person."

Ed McGolrick was in partnership with Bernie Bowles and Joe Gallagher at the time, and invited Alan Shachter to join them. Leo Scolforo and Nick Capousis were practicing at the firm as well. After a year, Shachter decided he "didn't like the firm thing" so he went back out on his own. Eventually Scolforo joined him and while they shared office space together they hired a lawyer fresh out of law school named Wenda Travers. Ultimately Scolforo and Travers purchased an office building and went into practice together and Shachter has remained a solo practitioner ever since.

One of the strangest cases Shachter recalls was in 1981, when he and Paul Gluchowski were appointed by Judge Percy Thornton to represent a man accused of robbing and killing a local shop keeper. The client was charged with and convicted of armed robbery and capital murder. He received two life sentences. Shachter and Gluchowski argued that "once he was convicted of capital murder, he couldn't be convicted of armed robbery because the armed robbery was an element of the capital murder." Judge Thornton "didn't agree with that" argument, so the case went to the Virginia Supreme Court and "they didn't agree with it" either. So they took the case to the "U.S. Supreme Court and wrote a petition for what they call certiorari. Nothing happens for a while and next thing, we get something in the mail from the clerk of the U.S. Supreme Court." It was "a summary reversal. they reversed the Virginia Supreme Court and threw out the armed robbery conviction." However, while their client was serving time for the capital murder, he was "charged with murdering another inmate, convicted of capital murder and sentenced to death. It turns out he had been framed" and the case was getting a lot of publicity at the time, so "Governor Gilmore took the death sentence off the table," leaving the client to face life without parole. It's not every day that intervening measures of that magnitude happen, much less twice to the same person.

Alan Shachter's biggest contribution to the PWC Bar Association was leading the team that developed our Judicial Evaluation Program in the mid 1990's. We were one of the few local bar associations to conduct judicial evaluations at the time and our program became a model for the state run, comprehensive program that is in place today.

When asked about what he might do in retirement, Shachter said he might "just keep coming to the office." He seems to genuinely enjoy what he does, musing, that it's 'nice when you have clients who have come to you for one thing and then they enjoyed that client/attorney relationship...and they come back on other things.' It sounds like as long as they keep coming back, he'll be there to help them.