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Taking time to represent the little guy

By John Flynn Rooney
Law Bulletin staff writer

While juggling his duties as managing partner of a large Chicago law firm, Ronald S. Safer finds time to represent clients whose liberty is at stake on a pro bono basis.

Safer, a former high-ranking federal prosecutor who is managing partner of Schiff, Hardin LLP, led a team of lawyers who successfully defended Julie Rea Harper, a downstate mother prosecuted for the killing of her 10-year-old son.

"It's tremendously fulfilling," Safer said. "The justice system every once in a while gets it wrong. It's a tremendous feeling to play some role in correcting it."

Jeffrey Urdangen and Karen L. Daniel, both with the Northwestern University School of Law Bluhm Legal Clinic, also represented Harper in the case, culminating in a not guilty verdict from a jury in Clinton County in July 2006.

Urdangen recalled that shortly before the trial, he and Safer knocked on doors at a Southern Illinois trailer park seeking information that might lead them to an important witness in the Harper case.

"Given his status as the managing partner of a large and prominent Chicago law firm, I would glance at Ron for a sign of self-consciousness or discomfort that any of this was somehow beneath his status," Urdangen said. "There was none of that."

"He approached this task like any other one necessary to prepare for trial," Urdangen said.

Urdangen said Safer is "a wonderful example of how to get results in this business while still maintaining your dignity, your professionalism and your class."

Safer and lawyers from the Center on Wrongful Convictions at Northwestern University School of Law also represent for free Kristine Bunch, an Indiana woman who was convicted of setting a fire in her mobile home that killed her 3-year-old son. Bunch's attorneys are seeking a new trial using advances in fire science in an attempt to prove the fire was not arson.



Marina Makropoulos

Ronald S. Safer, Schiff, Hardin LLP's managing partner, follows the firm's long history of representing clients pro bono, while also handling cases for paying clients.

Safer also led the defense team that represented Mark S. Kipnis, a co-defendant in the trial of fallen media mogul Conrad Black. Kipnis received probation on his conviction for honest services fraud, Safer said.

Safer has prevailed on behalf of clients in federal trials related to allegations of environmental contamination, employment discrimination and fraud.

Robert H. Riley, Schiff, Hardin's chairman, said Safer "brings tremendous passion to the representation of our clients, whether it be somebody who is able to pay for services or someone who isn't. That doesn't make any difference."

Safer was born in Flushing in Queens, N.Y., and grew up in a housing project there. His father was an

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accountant, and his mother was a teacher. Safer's older sister, Laura Safer Espinoza, is a criminal court judge in New York.

Safer said he wanted to become a lawyer since he was a boy. He attended the University of Pennsylvania and received his undergraduate degree cum laude from there in 1979.

He then worked for a year before enrolling at the Georgetown University Law Center and graduating from there first in his class in 1983.

Safer's first job out of law school was as a clerk for U.S. District Court Judge Thomas A. Flannery of the District of Columbia.

Flannery told Safer that a conscientious prosecutor can do more good for a criminal defendant than the best defense attorney in the world by not prosecuting people who shouldn't be entered into the criminal justice system.

"That resonated with me," Safer said.

Lawrence C. Marshall, a co-founder and former legal director for the Center on Wrongful Convictions, asked Safer to work on the Harper case.

"What has always inspired me about Ron ... is the story he tells about the judge [Flannery and] why he became a prosecutor," said Marshall, now an associate dean at Stanford Law School and director of the school's Mills Legal Clinic.

"A lot of folks might talk the talk, but Ron has really exemplified that

model in many different settings."

After his clerkship, Safer took a job as an associate with Schiff, Hardin in Chicago in 1984. It was at about that time that Safer began handling pro bono matters, such as landlord-tenant cases in the Cook County Circuit Court.

"That's where I first realized the power that your law degree gives you and the good you can accomplish when you throw that power behind the powerless," Safer said.

In 1986-87, Safer taught a street law class at Dunbar High School on Chicago's South Side. Two of his students have since attended law school.

One of those students, Sharon D. Hallstoos, now practices family and juvenile law in Iowa. As a high school student, Hallstoos had initially planned to become a secretary.

"It's because of Ron Safer that I'm in the legal field," Hallstoos said.

In 1989, Safer joined the U.S. Attorney's Office in Chicago and remained there for a decade, rising to chief of the Criminal Division.

Among the cases Safer oversaw was the four-year investigation and prosecution of the Gangster Disciples street gang on drug conspiracy and other allegations.

Safer could "see things from a broad perspective and he has compassion," said Andrea L. Zopp, who worked with Safer as a federal prosecutor and who is now executive vice president and general counsel for Ex-

elon Corp. "So, he can have some empathy for a defendant while still [directly] prosecuting his case."

Safer rejoined Schiff, Hardin in 1999. He has served as managing partner of the more than 400-lawyer firm since 2005.

"Ron is a leader in our firm because of the strength of his character," Riley said. "He doesn't just talk about what's important, he demonstrates what's important."

Safer said the Schiff, Hardin firm's "character" allows him to spend significant amounts of time on pro bono matters.

The firm has had a long history of pro bono commitment and service to the community, Riley said.

Safer "is acting in a way that is very consistent with the heritage of the firm," Riley said.

Riley also said that Safer exudes tremendous energy.

"He is extremely well-organized and, frankly, he loves being in the courtroom," Riley said. "So he will find the time to do what's necessary to help people whom this firm represents, including those pro bono clients of the firm."

Safer, 52, credits his wife, Peggy, for making it possible for him to handle pro bono work. Their children, who range in age from 11 to 24, become involved in his cases.

"They live these cases," Safer said. "You don't try crucial cases without your entire family's support."