

STEVE FROST

West Suburban Estate Planner Exudes Competence, Commitment and Caring

by John Toth

LISLE—When Stephen A. Frost offers business, tax and estate planning guidance to his closely held business and high net worth individual clients, it's with three decades of experience and insight as a CPA at a leading accounting firm and several of America's largest corporations and as partner in several Illinois law firms, culminating in his current leadership of **Hinshaw & Culbertson's** estate planning practice. Yet Frost, who is widely respected as a direct, down-to-earth and supportive advisor, puts on no airs about his resume.

"My past experience does enhance my credentials with clients," he explains, "but

'the dog that hasn't barked' and making sure it stays quiet."

The Lisle-based lawyer's clients reciprocate his commitment. Many have been with him 15 to 20 years, dating to when he entered private practice.

'An Ideal Person to Work With'

Craig Labus, partner in the Chicago accounting firm of Gilson Labus & Silverman LLC, illustrates the typical high regard that clients hold for Frost.

"I've worked with Steve for more than 15 years, beginning when a client of mine

Timothy Klein, a certified public accountant and a certified financial planner as partner in Lake Forest's Pasquesi Sheppard LLC, expresses similar sentiments.

"I've worked with Steve for a number of years and have referred many clients to him because he's very technically competent, has a businesslike approach and a good sense of humor and relates to clients well—he never gives clients a sense that he's above them," Klein says. "My clients are very receptive to Steve because he talks in layman's terms and explains very carefully what he's doing for them. Dealing with estate planning is by



ultimately they don't care how I've formed my ideas—they are more concerned with the ideas themselves."

That Frost cares a great deal about his clients is central to his practice. "It's very rewarding to help my clients succeed in business and personally," he says. "I am a sounding board for them and provide an independent source of judgment. If I'm doing my job right, I'm a valued business resource for them. That means thinking about issues before they are problems—trying to identify

recommended me to him," Labus recalls. "Steve is very direct and very competent in dealing with clients, but he's also very compassionate in caring for people in estate planning matters, especially if they've just had a death of a loved one. Steve understands and respects their feelings. I've referred many clients to him and we have a reciprocal relationship—I can feel free to pick up the phone to ask him a question, even in a matter where he's not directly involved, and I know he'll be happy to help me."

definition difficult for many people because the topic is serious and complex, but Steve's grasp of the issues and his ability to get clients to relax and interact with him makes him an ideal person to work with."

Frost's business owner clients encompass varied economic sectors, including real estate development, manufacturing, construction, and service businesses. Many have operations in several states, and some have an international presence. They are almost exclusively privately owned, with revenue of \$5

million to \$10 million and up. About two-thirds have family ownership, with family members involved in company management. Clients generally come to Frost by referral or as part of a relationship that he built with the owners.

"My business practice and individual representation overlap. It serves me well to have skills in tax, business and estate planning," Frost says.

In addition to estate and succession planning work, he structures partnership agreements and limited liability company operating agreements, assists with buy-sell transactions, and documents contractual obligations to avoid risk.

'The Rhythm of the Business'

In these and other activities, Frost takes a comprehensive approach.

"It's my obligation to understand the client's business and keep it properly functioning in light of the legal and tax systems and to work collegially with the client's accountants and other advisors," he says. "I also need to develop solutions to problems or creative ways to take advantage of opportunities."

In so doing, Frost adapts to what he calls "the rhythm of the business," as client needs vary. "Just the general day-to-day business operations are stressful enough for clients. A crisis may not happen often, but if there is one, such as a serious accident at a facility, we'll respond at any time."

Essential to Frost's client service approach is in-depth knowledge of his clients.

"You have to absolutely understand the client's business and business in general and assure them that you do so," he says. "It's very important to go to the client's business. Clients are always proud to show you what they have accomplished. They bear a tremendous amount of risk every day. I have a great amount of respect for them because what they do is not easy."

That respect is clear in how Frost advises and assists business clients. His colleague and partner in Hinshaw's estate planning group, John Dubbs of the Chicago office, says that Frost "is a rare combination of legal and business expertise and ability to work with people" and offers this example of Frost's approach.

One of Dubbs' clients was a foundry started 30 years ago and still run by three brothers. These owners needed a new partnership agreement and complementary estate plan.

Dubbs took Frost to meet with the brothers and recalls, "Every time I asked a question or raised an issue, Steve very quietly did a tremendous job of following up on what I raised and made sure these 30-year

foundry veterans understood what needed to be done."

Dubbs cites another example of a couple who disagreed for years about how to divide their estate but had to make a decision because of the husband's terminal illness. In one afternoon, Frost was able to help them work through the details.

"Steve is truly a caring individual. He has a genuine interest in and empathy for other people," Dubbs says.

'It's the Right Thing to Do'

Such caring and competence extend to Frost's wide range of community service. Over the years, he has devoted significant amount of time to serving as a leader in the United Way in Naperville and DuPage counties, Holy Spirit Catholic Community, the Naperville Chamber of Commerce, and various other organizations.

Since 2005, Frost has chaired the Naperville Transportation Advisory Board, which deals with issues of traffic and transportation. "I'm committed to doing things to give back to the community, because it's the right thing to do—not because of any personal benefit," he says. "I'm dedicated to the people and the community."

Frost entered private practice in Illinois in 1988 after a notable business career. An Iowa native who was drawn to estate and trust law in part because of his father's career as a bank trust officer, he is an accounting graduate of Iowa State University and earned his J.D. from the University of Iowa College of Law in 1981. Frost also became a CPA in 1981.

He began his career with Arthur Andersen & Co. in Kansas City, Missouri, providing advice on individual and corporate income tax strategies. He then moved into corporate tax positions with Cessna Aircraft Company in Wichita, Kansas, and the Yellow Freight System in Overland Park, Kansas. These assignments exposed him to a variety of business law matters.

"My work in the private sector was useful," Frost says now. "I was with very large companies that had sophisticated management systems, and they gave me a good feel for how high-level decision-making works. That experience enables me to bring a greater level of value to my clients."

Frost's moved to northern Illinois and the law firm world in 1988. His wife Mary, a native of Chicago, and their two children have lived in Naperville for about 14 years ("which makes me still a newcomer here," Frost laughs). He practiced with smaller firms in Chicago Heights, Oak Forest and Chicago, before joining Pedersen & Houpt in 2000. In 2006,

Hinshaw & Culbertson recruited him to help expand the firm's estate planning practice.

When Frost joined Hinshaw, the firm had no organized estate planning department.

"It became obvious to me very quickly that it would be beneficial to have a unified group," Frost observes. "I went to the department head and the Management Committee for approval, and they were very supportive, which I appreciated."

Dubbs cites other dimensions of Frost's accomplishment: "Partners stay here a long time, 30 years or more, and Steve hasn't been here as long as many other partners," Dubbs says. "But he has such extensive experience in estate planning and family wealth planning that we made him the first head of the firm-wide estate planning group. Steve has been a leader in developing peer review, quality standards and education for our practice. He has also been a real resource for other practice groups in the firm."

Frost's interest in teaching and associate development at Hinshaw reflects other educational activities outside the firm. He does extensive writing and instruction on behalf of IICLE, the Illinois CPA Society and the American Bar Association, among others. For nearly 10 years he has been an adjunct professor at DePaul University Graduate School of Business, where he teaches an estate tax class.

"The students are accounting majors working on their Masters of Taxation degrees," Frost says, "so it's essential that I keep up in all the latest changes in the tax law. For my clients, any actual or potential change in the tax laws can have significant consequences. Teaching has also been very helpful in enabling me to communicate tax issues to clients."

Through contacts with a friend, Frost has developed a particularly unusual teaching assignment. In August, he marked his third year as a visiting professor at Vytautas Magnus University Law School, in Kaunas, Lithuania.

"Lithuania created a new legal system after gaining independence from the USSR in 1991, and they are still developing it," Frost says. "The law school makes it a point to bring in foreign professors. Each year, I teach a trust and partnership law class."

With such active, varied and highly regarded accomplishments, Frost looks forward to extending the career and practice he has established.

"I very much want to continue doing what I do—working with businesses and high net worth individuals, teaching and expanding my group," he says. "I am helping others to succeed, and that is what is most important to me." ■