Christine Rhode

Estates Lawyer Masters Antiques and Fine Art, Pigs and Corn Growth

by Dan Rafter

Not many Chicago attorneys have needed to learn about the growth cycles of corn or the gestation period of a pig. But these are just two of the topics that Christine M. Rhode, a shareholder with Chicago's **Vedder Price P.C.**, has mastered to serve her clients.

Rhode, who represents clients on estate and financial-planning matters, boasts a varied career. She tackles tax issues for her clients and helps them meet their estate planning goals. She advises them on qualified plan distributions and manages large estates and trusts. She even helps clients create prenuptial agreements and special-needs trusts designed to benefit disabled children and adults.

Learning about corn and pigs? Rhode studied these topics because the estate of one of her clients included a large pig farm in Iowa as one of its assets.

"I talked to the decedent's relatives and found out the growth cycle of corn and the gestation period of pigs. It was all relevant to the case for tax reasons," Rhode says.

"You are always learning in this field. You never know what is going to come down the pike as you are working in these situations. People own a wide variety of assets. You have to learn how to deal with them and how to manage them."

During her career, Rhode has studied the value of fine art work and mastered the art of selling or donating costly antiques. She's worked with oil and gas ventures. She's helped clients build and sell their real estate portfolios.

The estate- and financial-planning fields, then, have helped Rhode learn about the world surrounding her.

"There is so much variety in this field," Rhode says. "And that variety comes both in terms of the clients that you are working with and the different areas of law that you are handling. Depending on the situation, you make excursions into other fields. Depending on what your clients are interested in and invested in, you can end up working on a lot of things you never would have been exposed to."

Rhode points to a case earlier in her career that stands out and provides a good example of how estate work can lead attorneys to new areas.

The decedent Rhode represented had passed away in an airline crash. Rhode did not handle the wrongful death

(Continued on page 102)

(Continued from page 100)

suit associated with this accident. But the decedent did own several unusual investments, commodity straddles and other exotic tax-shelter investments. The investments consisted of everything from movies to modern art work.

The decedent was already facing an income-tax audit at the time of the plane crash. He had also moved from Illinois back and forth to a community-property state.

To manage the estate, Rhode had to study art valuations, movies and the intricacies of community-property law.

"This case had quite a few aspects to it," Rhode says. "It went on for several years."

In another estate, the decedent had invested in real estate in distressed areas. Rhode had to help manage these properties and eventually oversee their sale.

"I learned about problems with real estate through that case," Rhode says. "There were many other different facets to that estate. And that's not unusual. Estates can be complicated. There are always things to learn."

The Start of a Thriving Career

When Rhode decided to enter law school, she was a rarity. Women accounted for 8 percent of the students in her University of Michigan Law School class. After Rhode graduated and went to work at Vedder Price, she was one of the first two women at the firm. Eventually, she also became the first female partner at Vedder Price.

"In the beginning, that could be awkward," Rhode says. "I remember going to law events. I was often the only woman there. I had some clients who at first did not want a woman representing them. So, yes, that was a very different time than it is today. Today, women make up around 50 percent of law students. That's been a positive change in the industry."

It doesn't mean women have exhausted their gains in the legal field. Far from it. As Rhode says, too few women have moved through the ranks and into the senior level of their firms as managing partners or shareholders.

Rhode remembers interviewing at one law firm early in her career. The attorney asked her if she planned to have children. And if she did, how did she intend to also succeed in her legal career?

"That kind of question would not be tolerated today," Rhode says. "Back then it was considered a legitimate question. But it was certainly not one that was asked of men."

As her own legal career steadily developed, Rhode was aware of the example she was setting for other female lawyers.

Her goal? She wanted to show others —male and female — that gender did not prevent anyone from succeeding in law.

"There were times when I was conscious of being the only female in a group of lawyers," Rhode says. "I always wanted to present myself as someone who was as professional and competent, someone who was as knowledgeable as anyone else. I didn't want to disabuse any woman of the notion that she could be a successful lawyer."

Jean Langie, director of fiduciary advisory services with myCFO, part of Chicago-based BMO Financial Group, isn't surprised that Rhode enjoys such a strong reputation in the estate- and financial-planning fields. She isn't surprised, either, that Rhode was once a trailblazer, showing sometimes skeptical clients and attorneys that women could succeed in law.

Rhode has legal talent in abundance, Langie says. She works hard. She researches. She's always willing to learn. And she never takes shortcuts when serving her clients.

Before Langie left Vedder Price to work for BMO, she had a client who was particularly demanding. That client ended up with Rhode after Langie left the firm. Rhode has handled this client masterfully, Langie says.

Rhode and grandson Kayden at a South Barrington pumpkin farm in October 2014.

"This client wants a lot of attention," Langie says. "Christine has given it. Christine has provided exactly the level of service to this client as I expected. She has been terrific to this client, exceedingly patient and kind. I never worried about this client moving to Christine. I knew it'd be a perfect fit."

Working with People Directly

Why has estate and financial work proven to be such a good fit for Rhode? Rhode says that she enjoys working with people. And in her field, she works directly with them — whether helping them plan their estates or helping them through the estate administration process after the death of someone close to them — rather than with officers in a corporation who are negotiating contracts with other corporations.

"Working with people as people rather than as officers in a corporation is more satisfying to me," Rhode says. "I've always found it more interesting to deal with people on a more personal level."

Still, challenges remain in her line of work. Rhode has seen far too many family conflicts, some of which are particularly difficult to resolve.

"Sometimes the death of a parent or family member brings out conflicts that have been simmering among other family members for a long time," she says. "It can get very unfortunate. That is the downside of working in this area."

Rhode cannot point to a magic formula to explain her success. Like most successful attorneys, she works hard, provides top service to her clients, and is creative in finding solutions.

She is also ethical and honest with her clients. That has helped Rhode craft a long list of repeat clients who continually come to her with their estate and financial-planning needs.

"So much of succeeding in this field is doing the best that you can for your clients," Rhode says. "You have to be responsive to your clients and their concerns. You have to be prompt and organized. You just need to get things done when they need to get done."

Rhode is a believer in the old quote about genius being 99 percent perspiration and just 1 percent inspiration.

"Not that I'm calling myself a genius — far from it. But so much of success is about just doing it, just getting it done," Rhode says. "Of course, it's important to get it done well and promptly. But if you can do that and you can be responsive to your clients' needs, you can do well in this industry."

(Continued on page 373)

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(Continued from page 102)

An Opportunity to Give Back

Mark Ishaug hasn't worked alongside Rhode as she's tackled complicated estate issues for her clients. He hasn't seen her talent when it comes to structuring trusts. But he has seen her dedication to the community.

And that's another facet of Rhode's success: She has never shied from serving her community. Even as she's grown a busy legal career, Rhode has volunteered with a variety of philanthropic organizations.

One of these is Chicago's Thresholds, which provides healthcare and housing to Illinois residents with mental illnesses. Ishaug is the chief executive officer of this agency, and Rhode has served as a volunteer board member for more than 25 years.

"That longevity is really a testament to her commitment to Thresholds and everything we stand for," Ishaug says.

He says Rhode has been especially active with Thresholds' employment services, which are designed to help people battling mental illnesses and homelessness find work.

"She and I both believe that work really is a key to recovery," Ishaug says. "She's been a big champion and supporter of our employment program."

Rhode has also tapped her legal skills to assist Thresholds, including helping the agency create guidelines for its planned giving. She also has made sure the organization's leaders understand the legalities of estate planning.

"I don't know exactly what Christine's day job entails. But I do know she has used those legal skills she has honed over a long, successful career to help us," Ishaug says.

Rhode has enjoyed the work she does with Threshold. It's important, she adds, to take on interests and challenges outside the world of law.

Too many successful lawyers focus on their careers at the exclusion of everything else, Rhode says. That can lead to a life marred by stress.

"Lawyers should take the opportunity to give back," she says. "They should take the opportunity to help the community and to do some pro bono work. They should be active in organizations, whether those organizations are legal-focused or not."

Rhode has not struggled to find and cultivate outside interests. The Chicago Bar Association boasts its own symphony orchestra, and Rhode is a clarinetist who has played there for nearly 30 years. In fact, she is nearly a charter member, having joined the symphony in its second year.

For Rhode, playing in the orchestra and volunteering with charitable organizations isn't just a good thing to do. It's a necessary part of life that provides relief from the often hectic world of law.

"When you are playing music, that is all you are doing," Rhode says. "You are not thinking about anything else. You are just playing the music. It's a great way to get away from everything else while doing something that is creative and engaging."

To those young lawyers hoping to build their own careers, Rhode has sound advice. She recommends that young attorneys work as hard as they can to improve their skills and their ability to practice law. At the same time, she adds, it's important for younger attorneys to know what they don't know and to get the help of people who are more experienced.

In other words, young attorneys shouldn't be afraid to ask questions and to seek out mentors. Rhode had her own mentors as she worked her way through the early days of her career. The help they provided was essential, she says.

"I was fortunate to find wonderful people to help me in my career," Rhode says. "They never made me feel as if they were reluctant in any sense to help me. When you're starting out, there is so much you don't know. Don't try to hide that. Seek out answers from the experienced lawyers around you." ■