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The Consensus Builder

Carol Rolf is a real pro at health care law—
and at finding common ground

by KATHRYN DELONG

photography by ALEJANDRO RIVERA

Every Friday, Carol Rolf's first boss—a politically connected Cuyahoga County appeals judge—took his law clerks and a group of judges to a private dining room on the second floor of downtown Cleveland's Theatrical Grill, which was a destination in the '70s for the city's power elite.

"You were expected to order a cocktail at lunch," Rolf remembers. "I'd never had a cocktail at lunch in my life. But we had cocktails, which meant Friday afternoons I was good for nothing."

Her immediate work may have suffered, but getting to know all those judges during her two-year clerkship with Judge Saul Stillman paid off in her next job, which was handling appellate work for the city of Cleveland.

In Rolf's world, one thing has always led to another. And her combination of skill, focused effort and character has made her a nationally recognized expert in health care law.

The practice area, dealing with a heavily regulated industry, can be hard to master. "You have to have significant expertise in terms of issues and regulations," says John L. Martin, director of the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities. "She is a combination of lots of expertise, good follow-through and good knowledge."

Were it not for some sage advice early on, however, the president and senior partner of Rolf & Goffman might not have become a lawyer at all.

"My plan was to get a Ph.D. in history," she says. "Most of the folks in my family are ministers or Ph.D.s, so they're academic types. We don't have any real-world people." But in the spring of 1973, with the country in an economic downturn, Rolf's plans changed. She was about to complete a bachelor's degree after only three years at Case Western Reserve University. One of her professors, author and historian C.H. Cramer, urged her toward law instead of an advanced history degree.

"I was a scholarship kid, I had no money, and he said, 'You've got to have a job at the end of the day when you get out of graduate school,'" she recalls. "So at the last minute I applied to law school."

She fondly remembers Cramer, who died in 1983, and his concern for her welfare. "He was a really great guy. I took every course he taught," says Rolf, who kept in touch with him and his wife long after getting her law degree at Cleveland State University in December 1975. "I graduated early there, too. It was all associated with saving money."

She heard about the Cuyahoga Court of Appeals position through a friend. At the time, Rolf had a temporary job obtaining grants for Cleveland State's street-law course, a practical, participatory program that was just being launched. The friend, Karen Newborn, now retired from Baker Hostetler, had been asked to interview with Judge Stillman but had been offered a job already. Newborn suggested that Rolf take her place.

"So I said OK," recalls Rolf, who immediately liked the judge. "He was such a lovely man. Very smart, very decisive in his decisions. He just loved young people."

Newborn called two years later with another opportunity. "You would think I paid her, but I didn't," Rolf says. "She was working at City Hall, which is right next door to the Court of Appeals. It was time for me to start looking for a job because I was getting to the end of my two-year gig, but I hadn't started looking yet. I hate to say this, but my whole career is like this. I haven't really applied for a job."

Even then, Rolf had the qualities of a standout lawyer, says Newborn, who met her in law school. They worked together on the street-law program and later overlapped a year at the city's law department. "She has a strong intellect, a real commitment to hard work, a lot of moxie, and she's very personally engaging," Newborn says. "I love Carol. We're very good, longtime friends."

Rolf worked under Jack Schulman, law director during Dennis Kucinich's mayoral tenure. She wrote briefs and argued them in front of judges who were her friends from the Theatrical Grill.

"And when I wasn't doing that, I represented the police department and the fire department. And that was frequently in federal court as well as common pleas court. Again, in many



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cases, I knew these judges personally, which was highly unusual for someone that young.”

She had one other internal client, the water department. “They had a big case—I can’t remember what the case was about, but it was big enough that they hired outside counsel, as sometimes cities and government agencies will do,” she says. “So I worked with a guy by the name of Joe Bartunek, who has also since passed away. He was a former judge, also very politically connected. I knew a lot of politically connected people, but I never personally was.”

At the conclusion of the case, Bartunek called Rolf to say his firm was looking for a lawyer and asked her to interview. “Well, why not?” she reasoned.

She got the job, but the firm dissolved soon afterward. “So what the partners did was sort of claim the associates to themselves,

kind of based on who they liked best,” she says. “And even though Bartunek essentially recruited me, the person who I ended up doing the most work for was Dennis Roth.”

It was Roth who introduced Rolf to health care law. “Prior to his association with this firm, he had always been a solo practitioner. He was very smart, entrepreneurial,” she says. “His clientele was primarily privately owned businesses—anything from car dealers to steel companies in those days. And then he had a contingent of people who owned nursing homes.”

The early ’80s were a pivotal time in Rolf’s life, not only from a career perspective but personally. She got engaged about the time of the firm’s breakup. Her husband-to-be, Steven Adler, lived in Boston. “So the issue was,” she says, “were we going to live in Boston or Cleveland?”

To Rolf, Cleveland was home, even though she didn’t grow up there. “I’m not really from anywhere,” she says. “I was born in Munich. My father was a military chaplain. Then when he came back to the States, he was in the Reserves.” The family moved all around the Midwest, but never to Cleveland, her mother’s hometown.

Her mother had graduated from the Frances Payne Bolton School of Nursing at Case Western Reserve University, and her father received one of his master’s degrees at Case.

“Our opponent is, nine times out of 10, the government,” says Rolf. “Those people aren’t going anywhere, so our job is to figure out ways to gain credibility with them, become persuasive with them ... and work collaboratively with them.”

So, though Rolf didn’t have Cleveland roots, she certainly had ties. And she didn’t particularly want to pick up and move, especially as her fiancé traveled extensively on business. “My philosophy was: why should I move to Boston when he’s traveling anyway?”

She had nearly convinced Adler to move to Cleveland when her boss sweetened the pot. “I think he was afraid I might leave, so he offered me a partnership, which was a little premature at that point because I had been out of school maybe five years,” she says. “It was a very junior partnership, but it really was important to me. So that was the tipping point.”

The new firm became Roth & Rolf, and for a couple of years it was just the two of them. In 1984, Roth & Rolf hired its first associate, Ira Goffman.

Over the years, Roth & Rolf and, later, Rolf & Goffman became more specialized, focusing almost exclusively on health care. Goffman became a partner in 1987; Roth left to start another firm in 2001.

Rolf & Goffman, now with six partners, six associates and one of counsel, has been in its Pepper Pike location for about 14 years. “Before that we were downtown, but then we realized we didn’t have to be because our clients are all over the state and, for the most part, we go to them; they don’t come to us,” Rolf says.

Among its services, the firm designs and implements compliance programs for hospitals, nursing homes, doctor-physician groups, pharmacies, home health agencies and facilities for the developmentally disabled.

Health care appeals to Rolf for the same reason it frightens others off: It requires exacting detail and the ability to accurately interpret and convey information handed down by the government.

“Our job is primarily rules and regulations. They change all the time, so it doesn’t get boring,” Rolf says. “You have to learn new stuff all the time. That’s fun.”

Rolf & Goffman has a litigation department, but that’s not the part of law that Rolf likes. She finds litigation too contentious; she prefers to find common ground. “Our opponent is, nine times out of 10, the government. Those people aren’t going anywhere, so our job is to figure out ways to gain credibility with them, become persuasive with them, show them the light, and work collaboratively with them.”

She finds satisfaction in helping her clients comply with the law and do the right thing by the people they serve. “I guess if you do this job well, you’re serving the greater good of everybody,” she says.

State agency director Martin has worked alongside Rolf as

well as on the opposing side. When he ran Sunshine Inc. of Northwest Ohio, a nonprofit provider of services for people with disabilities in the Toledo area, he hired Rolf as a consultant to work on certification and corporate structure issues. “I have a great deal of respect for Carol,” he says. “She’s very responsive. She’s very easy to work with.”

Martin, who became head of the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities when Ted Strickland was elected governor nearly four years ago, values Rolf’s knack for problem-solving. “She’s someone who tries to find solutions—to work out mutually acceptable solutions to everyone,” he says.

Martin views Rolf’s collaborative nature as one of the secrets to her success. She’s also in demand as a presenter at state and national conferences.

Rolf gives about 15 speeches a year, using PowerPoint but with little flash. “I wish I was funny, but if you’ve ever heard Garrison Keillor, you know that Lutherans are not funny people,” says Rolf, whose parents met at Zion Lutheran, where her father was assistant minister. “I’ve tried the joke route. I can’t deliver.”

Instead, she focuses on giving conference-goers what they need. “Basically, I’m talking to [health care] providers, so my job is to give them useful information in a way that’s understandable, so that they walk away with what they need to know and what they need to do,” she says. “That’s important to them because they don’t have time to read all this stuff. They need to go to someone they trust.”

At 58, she sees a future with no shortage of regulation. “The trend in government is to regulate everything to death,” she says. That bodes well for the lawyers at Rolf & Goffman, who will continue to advise their clients on handling the red tape.

In her time off, she enjoys the movies and the orchestra, as well as fine dining—the latter a nod perhaps to those Friday afternoons at the Theatrical Grill. She and Adler, a money manager, live in Aurora. Their identical twin sons are 23; one lives in Chicago and the other in Los Angeles. Rolf visits them whenever she can.

She also serves on the board of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Cleveland, as she has for well over a decade. “I regard that group as one of the best groups to give underprivileged children an opportunity to become whatever they want to become,” she says. The club provides a safe place to go after school, and has computers and tutors available for the students.

“I think the United States is a great land of opportunity. I feel like I’ve been the beneficiary of that,” says Rolf. “Somebody gave me money to go to school. With that education and with a couple of breaks from people, I was able to make a career and a life, and I want the same for them.” ◀