Life and death in the biggest City law firm in the biggest City

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ABSTRACT: A description of the traditions of legal practice inside a well-established prestigious New York law firm.

KEYWORDS: litigation — practice of law — legal practice — New York — partnership — law firm — tradition

[1] Associates at Cravath [Swaine and Moore] are considered for partnership in groups based on their year of graduation from law school. … During the period of frenzied discovery in 1974, the group of senior [Telex v] IBM team associates were entering the last crucial year or two before the fateful decision, and competition among them reached a fever pitch. … When Sahid scored another triumph by billing 24 hours in a single day, Rolfe — in a move that became the subject of legend in the firm — flew to California, worked on the plane and, by virtue of the change in time zones, managed to bill 27 hours in one day.

[2] Though Cravath had long been considered a “white shoe” firm, consisting mostly of lawyers who were white, Protestant, and from socially prominent families, that description tended to be more applicable to its clients than the firm itself.

[3] On the occasion of the funeral of David Louis Schwartz, the real estate partner of Cravath, a large block of seats at the front of the sanctuary [of Central Synagogue, on Lexington avenue] remained empty, enclosed by velvet ropes. Then, as the organ swelled and the faint hush of whispered greetings among the mourners subsided, a procession entered from the rear. Uniformly clad in dark suits, ties, and white shirts, sixty partners of Cravath, Swaine and Moore, all honorary pallbearers, marched slowly down the central aisle for their fallen comrade in a solemn procession known as the Cravath walk, two-by-two, in precisely the order their names appeared on the firm’s letterhead — a tradition at the funeral of every Cravath partner. As they filled the front of the synagogue, their en banc presence announced, as it had on so many occasions in the past, “A partner has died, the firm lives.”
The partner chosen for the eulogy was Max R Shulman, known as Bud. Shulman began by describing his first assignment from Schwartz. “When I walked into his office, he immediately grabbed me and rather breathlessly said he had something critically important that had to be done that very afternoon,” he said. “Of course, he forgot to tell me what it was or who the clients were or what the claims might be. He just bundled me up, said ‘Come on’, and off we went to a meeting in some office building in Manhattan, where he introduced me — with great solemnity — to a room filled with slightly nervous, slightly sweaty people as the Cravath litigation partner whom he had to call in, because a lawsuit was simply going to have to be filed.

“Not knowing what lawsuit, or what side I was supposed to be on, or even whether we were the sue-or or the sue-ee, I sat there looking slightly dangerous and muttering things I had read about in law school, like ‘lis pendens’ and ‘rule against perpetuities’ and ‘preliminary injunction’, and other appropriately aggressive catchwords.

“At the end of the meeting, everyone stood up, shook hands, and we left.

“Terrific job,’ David said to me. ‘You were brilliant. We got just what we needed. I don’t know how you did it.’ Neither, of course, did I. I didn’t know how I did it — or even what it was.

“That was my introduction to real estate litigation. ‘This isn’t bad,’ I said to myself. ‘You go to a meeting that you know nothing about with some people you’ve never met. You yell at them — hopefully not your own clients. You threaten to sue, — again, hopefully not your own clients. And in the end everyone shakes hands and does the deal’.”


Partner David Schwartz had negotiated and supervised the Cravath firm’s move into its new offices, see Park, “The Paperless Office”, 91 Vic Bar News 76 (Summer 1994).]