

HENRY MORRIS

Dealmaker Knows How to Keep His Clients Returning

by Dan Rafter

Henry M. Morris considers himself a dealmaker. It's an assessment that Morris' clients share.

For more than 50 years and counting, Morris, a member with the Chicago law firm of **Aronberg Goldgehn Davis & Garmisa**, has been building this reputation as a real estate lawyer who can make deals happen.

And along the way, he's developed a knack for long-range planning, helping his clients get from a single starting point to their long-term goals.

"I enjoy working with developers, owners and landlords of real estate to put deals together," Morris says. "I enjoy talking with our clients, saying 'You're sitting here today. You know where you want to be two years down the line. Let's plan out how to get there.' There is great satisfaction in getting it done."

Today, Morris focuses on real estate and construction, taxation and business planning, and business law.

But his real specialty? Creating clients for life.

Medical Office Buildings

As an example, Morris points to the work he's done with one particular client who has developed, built and leased four medical office buildings throughout the Chicago area.

Morris has known this particular client since the client was five years old. The client eventually became a physician and was Morris' personal doctor until he retired. Since then, Morris has worked to build and lease four medical office buildings with him, helping the client secure the right permits, navigate sometimes confusing zoning laws and find the right tenants.

This business relationship started in the 1980s, when Morris and his client worked together on the

first of the medical office buildings.

"One of the things that jumps out with these buildings is that we never put a shovel in the ground until we had the whole thing leased out," Morris says.

Today, the client still retains ownership in two of the four buildings.

What Morris remembers most about the deals is that it often seemed to take longer to pull together the investors in the buildings and find the right tenant mix for them than it did to actually build the structures.

"That is the part of the practice I really enjoy," Morris says. "I like noodling how to get from here to there. I enjoy figuring out what challenges we face in the middle of a project businesswise and legalwise. I like planning for those challenges."

The medical office work—Morris and his client finished working on the fourth and last building in the mid-1990s—required Morris tap a variety of his legal skills. When building these facilities, most of the tenants also became investors.

This wasn't always easy. Doctors, Morris says, are wonderful people when you need them to cure you. But they don't always understand how real estate deals work. It was up to Morris to educate them on what being an investor meant, and why it made financial sense for them to invest in the medical office space.

Morris also had to work on several challenging access issues while shepherding his client through the building process. This meant earning access easements from adjoining property owners.

Morris also had to be creative when it came to finding tenants. In one case, Morris and his client managed to turn the entire first floor of one of the buildings into an ambulatory surgical treatment



center, getting leasing on that particular building off to a good start. The treatment center helped attract several other tenants to the property.

The successful medical office building projects are just four examples of how Morris has impacted the real estate scene in the Chicago area. As a long-time real estate lawyer, Morris has helped shape the city's housing and commercial stock.

It's possible to trace Morris' impact all the way back to the late 1960s and early 1970s. Back then—in Morris' words, when he was a “baby lawyer”—he and his law firm developed a practice in representing clients who were building what were known as four-plus-ones, buildings in which the ground floor was devoted to parking and floors two through five were apartments.

Many of the structures were built in areas that required 50-foot setbacks. But the buildings couldn't be built economically if the setbacks remained in place. Morris and his fellow attorneys worked with a title company that was able to break those setback requirements, something that allowed the developers to proceed with their plans to build the four-plus-ones.

“In doing so, a bunch of buildings were built that might not have been built otherwise,” Morris says.

Morris has also earned such a stellar reputation from his clients that he has worked with many of them several times during his career of more than 50 years. For instance, he represented a client that purchased four shopping centers. When that same client was ready to sell those centers, Morris was called in again, this time to represent the client as a seller.

“That was interesting work,” Morris says. “There were some rather large numbers involved in those transactions.”

Why Clients Keep Returning

Many of his clients have returned to him several times. And why not? Morris is known for providing top service to his clients. He's also known as someone who's able to help these clients close their real estate deals in the shortest amount of time and with the least amount of stress.

“Here's what I'd like to believe that my clients say about me: I hope they say that I have always been responsive to their needs, that I've been available on a moment's notice and that I never cost a client a deal,” Morris says. “If a client wants to get a deal done, I'll get it done. I'm not there to prove how smart I am or how much better I am than the attorney on the other side. I'm here to get a deal done for my client.”

Dr. Noel Browdy, a retired specialist in internal medicine and cardiology in the northwest suburbs of Chicago, has relied on the legal advice of Morris for 30 years. He has helped the doctor complete several complicated real estate transactions.

What keeps Browdy coming back to Morris? It's the attorney's consistent track record of helping the retired doctor close the most successful transactions.

“We don't always agree,” Browdy says. “In fact,

we have argued a lot during the years. But his positions are always logical. They are always thought out, even if I don't always agree with them. He is a voice of reason for me.”

Browdy speaks highly, too, of Morris' ethics and efficiency. Morris doesn't take shortcuts to close deals. And he doesn't try to trick the clients or attorneys on the other side to win a favorable result for his own clients, says Browdy.

What Morris does do is research his cases extensively, work honestly with all parties in a transaction and take the most efficient—and cost-effective—route to a deal, Browdy says.

“Henry's responses have always been timely. He's always willing to talk with me and answer my questions,” Browdy says. “I'm the kind of person who always has to know what is going on. I need to know the why of what is happening. Henry takes the time to explain to me the why. When we do disagree he tries to point out where I might be in error, and he always does it logically.”

It takes more than this, though, for Browdy to work with the same attorney for three decades. Results matter, too. And Morris achieves results that have helped Browdy succeed in his real estate dealings, something that has helped turn Browdy



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into one of Morris' many lifelong clients.

“There is always a reassurance with Henry's work,” says Browdy. “Once he does his work, the results never come back to haunt me. There are never any loosey-goosey elements to his work. When it's done, I know it is done, and it is done the right way.”

Career Fits His Personality

Morris has built an undeniably strong career. But until he graduated, he wasn't even sure he'd become a lawyer.

But he did have a role model, his father. Morris' father worked as a lawyer before becoming an insurance adjuster after leaving the field of law during the Great Depression. And though his father died when Morris was 13, the youngster did see the work his father did. He even went to court with him occasionally, an experience that later inspired Morris to take up law, too.

That decision was obviously the right one. Morris has been a successful lawyer since 1962.

“After three years of undergraduate school with a major in economics, I suddenly realized that I had to do something with the rest of my life,” Morris

says. “I figured that I'd better go someplace else after my undergrad years. I went to law school.”

Once Morris decided to become a lawyer, he had another decision to make: Where should he focus his career?

Morris eventually decided on real estate work. It was the right fit for his personality.

“Commercial real estate is not usually adversarial. Everyone knows where we want to get to at the end of the day,” Morris explains. “You protect your client and you do the deal. I hope that clients appreciate that. I think that they do.”

Fifty years is a long career. But Morris says he has no plans to leave the field. After all, his practice continues to thrive. And just as importantly, the work that Morris does is varied.

In early December, for instance, Morris was representing a client who was making a loan to his wife's charity, working with the owner of an office building in a real estate finance transaction, and representing a client who was purchasing a condominium unit that was in the process of being built.

Not surprisingly, Morris has seen several changes in his industry during his long career. One of the more important changes has been the growing respect that real estate attorneys have earned during the last five decades.

“For the large firms, real estate was sort of a dirty word for them,” Morris says. “It was beneath them. They mostly left real estate law to the smaller firms. Well, I was happy to work on real estate, including some very big deals over the years. Some of those small firms that concentrated on real estate work are now megafirms today. The mega firms today understand and appreciate real estate work.”

Morris has seen another major change during his years in law. There is now a greater mobility among both clients and lawyers, he says. In 1962, attorneys who landed jobs at major law firms tended to stay with these firms for most of their careers.

That's not the case today. Morris sees that younger attorneys anticipate that their current job will be one of five or six they'll hold during their lifetimes.

“In 1962, the job you had was the job you were going to have for life,” Morris says. “People today are so much more mobile, by choice or by chance.”

The rewards of a successful real estate practice haven't changed, though. Morris often sees completed buildings in and around the city that he played a role in making possible. That is still a thrill, five decades into his career.

“Sometimes you think, ‘This might not be here if it wasn't for me,’” Morris says.

“You take some pride in the fact that you assisted in making that building a reality. You played a critical part in getting that building built in 1970. In 2013 it's still there. People are living there or working there. I do think there is some pride and pleasure in that.” ■