

# John Goldstein

## The Bridge Builder

by Paul Dailing

“My kind of law is often different than other people’s,” John A. Goldstein of **Greensfelder, Hemker & Gale, P.C.** says, taking loan transactions as one example.

“The other side, my opposing counsel, is my client’s customer. So it’s a very different relationship than when you’re in a litigation piece or a lawsuit and you’re suing someone and you’re archenemies,” he says.

“I have to be careful. I have to represent my client zealously, which I do completely, but I have to be respectful if this is going to go forward and this other side, this borrower, is the bread and butter of my client, the bank.”

Goldstein’s practice as an officer in the firm’s real estate practice is a varied field, one he says is surprisingly immune to the ups and downs of the market.

Economic downturns such as the one the nation saw in 2008 led to more work in restructuring, amendments, refinances of loans, workouts and the like. The current economic recovery has pushed his practice more toward construction lending as new buildings go up.

Goldstein’s constant consideration for his client’s needs appears in the efficiency and precision with which he tackles his work. He is always prepared, always diligent and always looking toward the big picture, says Bridgeview Bank Group Vice President - Commercial Banking Julia Van Vliet.

“In this business, everything is very time-sensitive, and he is incredibly efficient with very complicated documentation,” says Van Vliet, who has worked with Goldstein on a number of projects since the late 1990s. “You find out right away who really knows the important nuances of legal documentation. The people who go back and forth on these issues waste clients’ money.”

Goldstein says real estate law differs from litigation where the goal is to defeat the opposing side in a courtroom battle.

“We win if we close the deal and everybody’s happy and the paper matches what the transaction is and there’s a big closing dinner with all the sides,” Goldstein says. “That doesn’t happen in other kinds of law.”

Although Goldstein’s goal is to keep his clients away from the courtroom, litigation happens. His preparation and diligence comes to play then as well, says Huron

*(Continued on page 86)*



(Continued from page 84)

Consulting Group Assistant General Counsel Beatriz M. Olivera. She is a litigator who worked with Goldstein when they were at Harris Kessler & Goldstein LLC, now part of McDonald Hopkins.

"I always had confidence stepping up and representing his clients in court because I always know the underlying work will be perfect," Olivera says.

Olivera calls Goldstein a renaissance man, as personable as he is efficient.

Her "go-to guy for any real estate question" during their time at Harris Kessler, Goldstein often does work for Olivera's clients at Huron.

"The fact I brought him in to do that is a reflection of my confidence in him," she says.

## Warming up to Practicing Law

Goldstein, 56, was born in Chicago, the youngest of three to a math teacher mother and a salesman father. He was raised in north suburban Glencoe.

College took him to Washington University in St. Louis where he graduated *magna cum laude* in math and art history with a minor in music. Law wasn't a goal.

After graduation, he decided to take the LSAT because, in his words, "Why not?"

It was a whim, but he scored in the top two or three percentile, he recalls. He decided to apply to law school and got into Northwestern Law, though he didn't really embrace his new career until he was a young associate.

He describes his arc as "going from 'not really knowing that much about being a lawyer' to 'law school was kind of OK' to 'I love the practice. I've never wanted to do anything else.'"

He still remembers the moment he fell in love with law. He was an associate with Katten Muchin & Zavis, working with a partner to draft a term loan agreement. It was a multimillion-dollar refinance of a shopping center, with his firm representing the lender.

"All of a sudden, I drafted the documents and they matched what the deal was. The magic of the word matched what the concept was of what we were trying to do," Goldstein recalls. "When all of a sudden it clicked and you saw how everything worked together and it matched what was in the term sheet, that was kind of an 'aha' moment for me."

Goldstein's approach to his career combines his mathematical mother's attention to detail and his salesman father's conviviality. He's as excited by putting together technical minutiae as he is by bringing people together looking for the

best outcome for all parties.

"If everybody does their part, if the client gets me the information I need, and the other side responds to me, and the lawyer accurately on the other side portrays what his client is telling him and we can put it all together, that excites me. And that spills over into how I feel about (my practice)," he says.

Another bit of excitement comes from having a real, tangible result at the end.

"I have visuals," he says. "I mean, I do real estate law. I can look around the Loop, and I can see buildings that I've worked on, and that's really kind of fun."

His national and international practice dovetails with his love of travel. A recent cruise down the Ganges in India passed through a town where he recently completed a transaction, a bit of connectivity a world away.

He fell in love with travel when his parents took him to London for his 16th birthday. Since his 20s, he has traveled to every continent (yes, even Antarctica) and about 130 to 140 countries.

His trips are more adventure and education than recreation. He went to Iraq during a brief lull in fighting during 2013. He has traveled to Iran, Libya, Syria, Sudan, every country in Asia, most countries in Africa and every country in South America.

There's some networking — he has picked up clients in Australia, for example — but the rewards are mostly personal.

"It opens up a perspective and horizon and a worldview," he says. "I don't want to sound too goofy about this, but nobody I run into — a cab driver — they're not really foreign because I've usually been to their country. From a personal standpoint, it's made the world such a small place, and that's why I do it."

His trips are, he clarifies, not always fun.

"Fun is going to Mexico and you're in one of these hotels where you're over the water and someone's bringing you a cocktail. I don't do that kind of travel. That's not my idea of an exciting trip. That's different," he says. "My trips are rough, but they're so much more because of what they do to my worldview."

## Building Bridges With People

Van Vliet says the appeal of working with Goldstein is twofold.

First, it's his deep knowledge of the intricacies of commercial real estate and documentation.

"He has a very high level of expertise in commercial real estate, which can be very technical," Van Vliet says. "You've got to have a good group of people to work with."

Secondly, it's a chance to work with John

Goldstein, a man who can bring all parties to the table and connect them in a way beneficial to all.

"Not everyone in this field is very personable. That goes a long way," Van Vliet says.

Goldstein's love of bringing people together shows itself not just with clients, but within the firms themselves.

Steven Schroeder, currently director of practice and regional marketing at Perkins Coie LLP, met Goldstein about five years ago when they were both at Hinshaw & Culbertson LLP. Schroeder was chief business development officer and had a neighboring office to Goldstein's.

"One thing I always got a good feeling from him about was how always he wanted to mentor people and share experiences and help bring together people," Schroeder says. "I think he just hits a home run on how he communicates and works with his clients."

Goldstein often acted as a sounding board for the marketing department, always willing to lend a hand and ear to help the firm.

"Attorneys are very busy and don't always offer that kind of help with non-billable type of things," Schroeder says. "He was always gracious with his time."

For the last 11 years, Goldstein has been associated with the Joseph Jefferson Awards Committee, the not-for-profit volunteer group that judges excellence in Chicago theater. He currently serves as vice chair.

Attending and rating the plays and actors of the approximately 200 professional theaters large and small through the city, the "Jeffs" are Chicago's version of the Tonys.

He's also president of district 13 of the American Contract Bridge League, which covers most of Illinois, Wisconsin and upper Michigan. He's a tournament player and teacher around the world, most recently organizing a 13,000-table, 52,000-player tournament in Chicago.

His love of bridge started on a whim.

"I walked into a club game in 1991 at Park Place on Irving Park Road and the guy said, 'You're here to play bridge?' and I said 'Yeah, I saw an ad in the newspaper.' 'Sit down and play,'" Goldstein recalls. "I didn't know how to play. I learned fast."

Goldstein doesn't see his interests in travel, theater, bridge and real estate law as diverse. He sees all four as different aspects of the same drive within him.

"It's a great way of meeting people, being with people, socializing, networking, putting it all together," he says.

## Creation and Connection

Goldstein says 90 percent of his workload is writing, creating the documentation that

(Continued on page 207)

## **GOLDSTEIN**

*(Continued from page 86)*

will allow people to build something new.

“The other 10 percent is a combination of structuring, negotiating, getting my secretary to stay late and taking staples out of thick documents,” he says, chuckling.

He always strives for efficiency. Olivera recalls that “his desk always looked like an empty aircraft carrier” but that he was always able to put his hands on whatever document he needed within seconds.

But he has always kept an eye on how these creations connect human beings. His work for up-and-coming restaurants in the trendy Bucktown neighborhood, for example, helps him keep a finger on the pulse of the community where he has lived for the last 16 years.

Even his own career path reflects his drive to connect. He has worked at big firms, small firms, in-house, any possible career path except one. He has never been or will be a sole practitioner.

The twin drives to create and connect mean he has found the perfect place in Greensfelder, which he joined in August to build up the transactional, real estate and corporate practices in the 10-15 attorney Chicago office.

“I’ve come in at a perfect opportunity to really grow, both my clients and what I do, but also bringing lawyers in, building it up here,” he says.

He calls the Chicago office “a small firm atmosphere with big firm resources and platform.”

“While we can still have birthday cake once a month for everyone’s birthdays because we’re a small shop, I still can also turn to a robust construction law group or environmental group or real estate tax group to add onto my practice,” he says.

He mentors younger lawyers, serving on the mentorship and recruitment committees for each firm where he’s worked.

“I think that can make or break careers for younger lawyers, if they have somebody good that not only teaches them the ropes but provides some sort of inspiration for why we do this,” he says.

He says he has found a home at Greensfelder.

“Here, it’s a dynamic group of people who have come from other places with the common goal of building this office,” Goldstein says. “I really feel that now, after a lot of turns in the road, I’ve landed in a place where there’s a great meeting of the minds in terms of what I want to do and what their mission and their vision is.” ■

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