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The Book of Daniels

Real estate lawyer John Daniels uses business instincts and people skills to help shape Milwaukee

by KEVIN DAVIS photography by COREY HENGEN

During luncheons and dinner events, John W. Daniels Jr., the chairman of Quarles & Brady, is notorious for excusing himself from his table, making his way around the room, and networking and catching up with old friends. He rarely returns to his seat. His food usually goes cold.

“We always have a joke about whether we should even have a seat for John at our table,” says Ann Murphy, member of Quarles & Brady’s executive committee and managing partner of its Milwaukee firm. “We’ve said we can save money on John because we don’t have to buy a meal for him.”

It’s not just luncheons, either. For the past four years, Daniels, 62, has made it his business to get out of his chair and out of the office. He hits the road and meets with clients and CEOs. This past spring he made the rounds at firm offices in Arizona, Florida, Madison and Chicago to rally colleagues for their annual meetings. Since Daniels arrived in 1974, the firm has grown more than fivefold: from 80 to 450 lawyers.

But for all this travel, Daniels is very much rooted in Milwaukee, a city where his family’s name is synonymous with civic involvement. Evidence of Daniels’ impact is all over Milwaukee: from the downtown Grand Avenue revitalization project he

helped put together, to the Boys & Girls Club that bears his name, to the annual Fellowship Open charity golf tournament that’s one of the summer’s hottest tickets.

That’s one of the reasons he signed up with Quarles & Brady in the first place. “I thought, ‘If I go to this firm, I can not only practice law but I can have an impact on the community,’” he says. “That’s what sold me on Quarles & Brady. And it’s turned out to be a great fit.”

Daniels, who majored in business in college, thinks and talks like a businessman. He uses business-like metrics. He’s instituted, for example, client value standards: a system to help document and meet clients’ expectations by allowing them to evaluate the firm’s performance. “Our business planning model is more of the nature of what the best corporate businesses do,” he says.

Daniels also lets staff and colleagues know how important they are. “You learn something from everybody. My motto is: ‘Everybody counts, every day,’ and I really mean that. In the best organizations, everyone is empowered.”

If that sounds optimistic, well, that’s Daniels. His own life, he says, is reason enough to be hopeful. “I frequently tell people that I started school in a legally segregated school and finished at Harvard Law School,” he says. “That is really my view of the world: Things can change; people can change and make things happen.”



The Fellowship Open, which Daniels (here with 2010 honoree Junior Bridgeman) helped found, raises \$75,000 a year for community-based organizations that work with needy kids.

THE FIRST BIG CHANGE for Daniels happened when his parents moved to Milwaukee from Birmingham, Ala., in the mid-1950s, seeking better opportunities and greater racial tolerance. They left just before the civil rights movement took hold there. His maternal grandfather, a Baptist minister who stayed behind, was in the thick of it. “We had a keen interest in seeing it unfold and observed it as many others did—on TV,” he says.

His father worked for the Navy just across the state line in Illinois while his mother was a

social worker’s aide. He and his seven siblings went to mostly white schools.

After graduating from high school in 1966, Daniels briefly considered medicine, but organic chemistry just didn’t click for him. Instead he studied business at North Central College in Naperville, Ill., and educational policy at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, where he intended to pursue a Ph.D. “A lot of my family had been involved in education,” he says. “In my generation, that was something you aspired to be.”

It was at Madison that he met several Harvard students who were working on urban education reform, a subject that intrigued him. So Daniels applied to Harvard, intending to combine a law degree with his Ph.D., and do similar work. But going to law school and writing a dissertation at the same time was too much to handle. He chose law.

Daniels married Irma Hall, also of Milwaukee, during his first year of law school. (They have two children, John, 32, a teacher and technology specialist, and Inez, 20, a junior at Spelman College. Their 2-year-old grandson is named John Daniels IV.) He also met a few professors who would help shape his career.

He took a class on labor law from Archibald Cox, who would soon become the first special prosecutor during the Watergate scandal, and he recalls one day asking Cox for help. “[Cox] sat there with me for an hour and started talking about the implication of labor law,” he says. “He gave me all this attention.”

Then there was Mort Zuckerman, former publisher of *New York Daily News* and editor-in-chief of *U.S. News & World Report*. “He taught a course on real estate development, and I just couldn’t get enough of it,” Daniels says. “It was a course with 20 to 25 people, which really allowed you to see the possibilities.”

Graduating with a Harvard law degree in 1974, Daniels had his pick of prestigious firms in major cities. But his wife and family were rooted in Milwaukee. The question was: Which firm?

During a summer break, while clerking for Legal Action of Wisconsin, a colleague invited him to lunch with Mike Bolger, an attorney and recruiter for Quarles & Brady. “I look for people who are smart,” says Bolger, who later left the firm to serve as president and CEO of the Medical College of Wisconsin. “You have to have that gray matter to work at a big law firm. You need to be well rounded, but not a nerd who spends all his time in the law library.”

The lunch, and subsequent meetings, went well. “We were taken with him as both a person and a future lawyer,” Bolger says. “We talked about making Milwaukee a better place, about having an impact. He wanted to give his time and talent to that.”

Daniels was the first African-American on staff. “There were no minorities. I think that was pretty much true of many

law firms at that point,” Daniels says. “I was never that uncomfortable with that part of it. I knew I could do the work. Maybe I was overconfident. But I felt I could do the work. Maneuvering through the other part of it, well, that’s life. Life is not riskless.”

As a young associate he did both labor law and real estate law, but the latter won out. “I like doing deals,” he says. “I just like getting people together, figuring out how to align the interests of the parties, figuring out how to make something happen when the parties aren’t necessarily at the same point.”

Those deals include, in 1982, the creation of the Milwaukee Grand Avenue Mall, a public/private redevelopment to revitalize the downtown area, to, in Daniels’ words, “take back a downtown that, frankly, [was suffering] the fate of many downtowns.”

Daniels worked with Art Laun in representing The Rouse Company, which specialized in urban redevelopment projects and shopping malls. The lawyers had to negotiate deals to assemble blocks of separately owned properties, many of which were under antiquated ground leases.

“Here you had a historic property that was the cornerstone of Milwaukee being converted to rejuvenate urban retail, and it brought in all the pieces of what I love: the finance, the public sector, creating something [to] significantly change the landscape of the community,” Daniels says. “It represented an opportunity for me to see how you put together a deal that’s very complex. The entire thing took about three to four years.”

He also worked on deals involving the Midwest Airlines Center and the Bradley Center. In the former, he represented the property owner whose land sat smack in the middle of the proposed project. The property was subject to condemnation proceedings to allow construction to go through, and Daniels says he negotiated a nice payout for his client.

“If I were in a deal, he’d be the guy I’d want on my side,” says Tim Sheehy, president of the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce, who recruited

Daniels to serve on his board. “He’s very competent in a quiet way. He will outwork you, outsmart you and out hustle you.”

Julia Taylor, president of the Greater Milwaukee Committee, an organization made up of area business leaders working to improve the cultural and economic base of the city, adds, “John is pretty quiet in some ways about what he’s engaged in. You see John’s fingerprints over everything, but unless you know he did it, you wouldn’t know about it from him.”

Ten years ago, for example, Daniels and his colleagues were lamenting poor graduation rates in Milwaukee’s schools. So they organized a golf tournament to raise money for community-based organizations that work with needy kids. Held every August at Silver Spring Golf & Banquet Center in Menomonee Falls, the Fellowship Open now raises more than \$75,000 per year for a variety of organizations, and includes a mentoring program for young people interested in business.

“When I see those kids,” Daniels says, “and I see those kids touch people they might not otherwise touch, and I see that maybe I can motivate people, that makes it worth it.”

THAT KIND OF involvement is what the Daniels family is all about.

“The Daniels name is very well known in Milwaukee,” says Taylor. “It’s a brand of civic involvement in Milwaukee, of giving back.”

With his brother, Bishop Sedgwick Daniels, spiritual leader of Holy Redeemer Institutional Church of God in Christ, Daniels worked on a number of projects to help revitalize his neighborhood, including housing and education projects. There was also a community center. It was named for their mother: the Mother Kathryn Daniels Conference Center for Community Empowerment and Family Reunification.

Daniels is also a partner and confidante to his sister, Valerie Daniels-Carter, president of V & J Foods, one of the nation’s largest minority-owned franchise food companies. She’s now considered one

of the nation’s leading African-American women entrepreneurs, and Daniels helped her with startup money. He’s also chairman of the board at V & J. “She really runs the business. I’m older than she is, so I’m sort of an adviser,” he says. “It’s a consequence of being part of a family that does a lot of stuff together. You just support each other.”

Indeed, for as long as anyone can remember, every Sunday after church, the Daniels family and a few friends have gotten together for dinner. It’s one meal at which Daniels doesn’t work the room while his food grows cold. “I wouldn’t miss it,” he says. “That tradition goes way back to my grandfather.”

Daniels-Carter hosts. “I tell everyone to leave your feelings at the door. We talk about everything from religion to politics to family matters,” she says. “Our family is split between Republicans and Democrats. I’m nonpartisan. I’m always in the middle. I want everyone to be friends.”

“Everything is so fast-paced now, everybody has pressures on them during the week and [it’s good to have] something you can look forward to, to relax,” Daniels says. “We try to leave the business part of it [at the door] as much as we can. I mean you have six days of doing business. But certainly we talk about stuff to improve the community.”

Daniels-Carter calls this “part of the legacy we all have agreed upon. To make the city better, you have to reinvest in the city.” She adds of her brother, “He is so engaged in things that he doesn’t seek to be recognized and he doesn’t seek publicity. John is passionate. He’s driven and he’s very compassionate in terms of investing in people.”

That’s part of the reason why, despite his many connections, political office doesn’t interest Daniels. He believes he can be more effective as a private person. “Because of my background as a lawyer and a business person, and my track record of getting things done, if I get engaged in something, the possibilities of this or that happening are very good,” he says. ◀