

ZOA People

Profile: Cliff Rieders, Esq.

Cliff Rieders sometimes seems surprised by the variety of experiences his rich and active life has brought him. He will recount anecdotes about the extraordinary people he has encountered or worked with over the decades and then declare, "It has indeed been a marvelous, eclectic, iconoclastic life and career that I have led."

Rieders practices law and resides in Williamsport, PA, where he is a partner in the law firm of Rieders, Travis, Humphrey, Waters & Dohrmann. He is past president of the Pennsylvania Trial Lawyers Association, a founding member of the Pennsylvania Patient Safety Authority, the author of five textbooks on various legal topics, and a frequent writer of opinion pieces on issues surrounding Israel and the Middle East, which he contributes mainly to central Pennsylvania newspapers. He has served on numerous committees, including teaching for the Pennsylvania Bar Institute and Pennsylvania



Supreme Court Standard Jury Instruction Committee. He also has worked long stints in engineering and finance, the latter when his mother, who was the first professional controller of Revlon, took over her late brother's engineering company, Metrolab. Rieders took a six-year part-

time sabbatical from the law to be Metrolab's financial controller. He also holds a mariner's license and has worked at the U.S. Commerce Department's ships subsidy program, where he was involved in the debate over the virtues of single- or double-hulled vessels. "I recommended they be

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double-hulled, but they weren't, and then we got the Exxon Valdez," Rieders recalls ruefully.

Rieders is involved with numerous Jewish organizations, but particularly and primarily with the ZOA, where he serves as a member of the ZOA's National Board and also on the Advisory Board of ZOA's Center for Law and Justice. Rieders sees in the ZOA an organization that has been and remains "quint-essentially correct" in its approach to the issues and challenges Israel must face. He sees himself as a reservoir of legal support for the ZOA: "It's a national organization, in the crosshairs of a lot of bad people because it's high-profile, so there are always issues that come up, and the question often is how to address these problems."

Rieders was born in New York City to a Jewish family that is five generations American on his father's side. His Brooklyn-born mother, whose family came from Poland, was raised on a dairy farm. When Rieders was a child, his family moved to Great Neck, NY, where his parents were among the founders of the Great Neck Synagogue and where he attended Jewish schools. He grew up hearing stories of his mother's family in Europe, who were trapped in the Shoah; of his grandmother from Krakow combing the

lists of survivors, tears running down her cheeks, in hopes of finding surviving family members, almost all of whom had been murdered by the Nazis. One of his grandmother's brothers survived and made a new life for himself in Israel, after living in a tent city in Hadera. Rieders's family raised money for their relatives in Israel to join them in America, but they declined. Having survived the Nazi genocide and harrowing military service in the Soviet Red Army, they wanted to remain in the Jewish homeland.

Rieders's parents were strong Zionists and, unusually, Republicans. In fact, his father organized the Reagan campaign headquarters in Great Neck and "was nearly run out of town, but he didn't care," Rieders laughingly recalls. "It was, in short, a life of tremendous Zionism, Yiddishkeit, and Jewish education; a very active, energetic Jewish world."

Rieders attended New York University, graduating cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa, before obtaining his Juris Doctor degree from Georgetown University Law Center, which he remembers as a "remarkable, wonderful experience." Following law school, he worked first for the extraordinary lawyer Henry Rothblatt, who initially defended the plumbers who broke into the Watergate Hotel

in 1972. When Rothblatt dropped the case, Rieders found himself at once confronted by the *Washington Post's* Carl Bernstein, one of the two famed journalists who broke the Watergate story. Bernstein wanted to know the reason for the defense being dropped—something about which Rieders was unable to enlighten him.

With Rieders wishing to work for a federal judge, Rothblatt recommended him to Malcolm Muir, who became the fourth most senior federal judge at the time of his death in 2011, at the age of 94. Muir, recalls Rieders, was "the anvil of excellence"—an unrelentingly demanding, perfectionist boss. So difficult was working for Muir that Rieders at one point handed him a letter of resignation, which Muir promptly tossed into the fireplace with the words, "Young man, you have to be tougher in this profession." But the experience was invaluable. "It was phenomenal training," Rieders says.

He then worked for Henry G. Hager, a moderate Republican who served as president pro tempore of the Pennsylvania State Senate in the 1970s and '80s. "He was extraordinary to work with," Rieders reminisces. "He had an amazing way of drafting legislation. No one really does it like that anymore. When writing anti-BDS legislation,

as I have done, I thank Hager for the education I received in drafting laws." Rieders has written dozens of pieces of legislation for various legislators.

But Zion has loomed just as large in Rieders's life, and, having worked with a number of major American Jewish organizations, Rieders holds a special affection for and commitment to the ZOA. "I have known Mort Klein since the early 1980s, and even before he became president I had done some legal work for ZOA. In any event, one thing led to another and I became progressively more involved," said Rieders.

"What I value in ZOA is that ZOA was not and is not apologetic for Israel or Judaism. ZOA is quintessentially correct on the issues that are vital to the survival of Israel, without apology. Mort was looking for expertise so he could make the ZOA a better, [more] successful organization. That's why I'm comfortable with ZOA, and it has indeed been very successful in standing up for Israel's interests in a way other organizations won't do. Mort is an exceptional person. I see my own role within ZOA to be a sort of legal elder statesman, ready to help anyone in ZOA who has a legal or quasi-legal question. Which brings me back to Mort. Many people I have known over the years in different

work that I have been engaged in—law, engineering, finance—have asked my opinion, but, in reality, not everyone genuinely wants to hear something that differs from their own views. Mort is different. You can give Mort an opinion and he will listen honestly. He has a scientific approach to the truth—he wants more evidence and will look at contrary evidence, to ensure he understands something properly."

Rieders continues to support the ZOA, deeply concerned now at the influx of anti-Israel voices into the Democratic Party. "It is important that Israel not face unnecessary, illicit pressure from U.S. politicians, yet you can see what has happened in Israel's recent wars. I remember in the 1990s personally speaking to President Bill Clinton, who assured me to my face that 'We're going to stop those missiles raining down on Israel from Hezbollah.' Well, it hasn't happened, and now you hear Hillary Clinton using the same terminology recently."

Rieders and his wife, Kim, have three children—their eldest daughter who is a molecular biologist and lawyer in the law firm, a second daughter living in Israel who has served in the Israel Defense Forces and is currently enrolled in a dual-language law school, and a son who is a Jewish studies major at SUNY Bingham-

ton and who, like Rieders, holds a mariner's license. Of his wife, Rieders says, with evident pride: "Having a spouse whose Jewish ancestry goes back to the time of the American Revolution has stimulated my interest in the largely unknown role of American Jewry at the time of America's inception. It is also nice to have Kim as my biggest fan and best friend."

Rieders's life is not slowing down. His family foundation has produced a documentary, "Golden Treasures," about the Judaica collection held by the Vatican in Rome. "We were the first ones ever to actually receive a written response on the subject from the Vatican, on the whereabouts of these treasures," he says. In his scant spare time, Rieders reads voraciously (currently, Ron Chernow's *Washington: A Life*), not least about quantum physics, which he has followed almost since the inception of the discipline, having taken the first course in the subject when it was offered at New York University. "I was just thinking the other day about the enjoyably varied life I have had," says Rieders, with the satisfaction that comes from a life well-lived. ■

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