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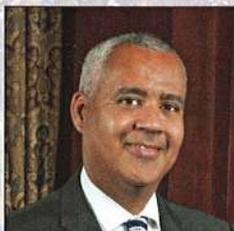
Philadelphia Bar Association Quarterly Magazine

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“This is how bad the partisanship has gotten in Washington. I was in the Senate cafeteria the other day. And the peas and carrots are now refusing to be served together.”

“I wrote that joke for former Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell,” Randy Maniloff says with an impish grin. “I was interviewing Mitchell on the phone. He’s a very serious environmentalist so I told him a global warming joke. He liked it. He said he’s always looking for new jokes for his speeches and asked if I could send him some.”

Telling jokes and speaking to renowned people are two things that Maniloff does often. The White and Williams LLP insurance lawyer regularly interviews some of the most famous lawyers and judges in America: Grisham. Dershowitz. Posner. Maniloff’s other past time is performing stand-up comedy. He won the John DeBella Stand-Up Comedy Competition in 2013.

Maniloff’s interviews are done for Coverage Opinions, a free monthly insurance coverage newsletter that he writes. Launched in 2012, “CO,” as he likes to call it, has grown to nearly 23,000

subscribers. Maniloff takes CO very seriously. So seriously that he gave up his partnership at the 116-year-old firm, and transferred to a counsel position, to pursue it. “I wanted to own the intellectual property in it,” Maniloff says. “I knew it was going to take a lot of passion to do it right. I needed to own it to find that dedication.”

The newsletter has succeeded beyond Maniloff’s wildest expectations. “I never imagined having this many subscribers and I never foresaw interviewing all of these famous lawyers,” CO’s proud parent says. Despite its success, Maniloff mentions frequently that it is still just an “obscure insurance newsletter.” That may be, but the newsletter has spent some time on the big stage. Interviews have appeared on Law.com and some CO articles have been mentioned on The Wall Street Journal Law Blog, Above the Law and SCOTUSblog. “One was even cited in a brief in the Eastern District,” Maniloff says, incredulously.

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While the newsletter’s focus is “hardcore insurance” – reporting on important new coverage decisions -- the interviews have nothing to do with insurance. “I started out interviewing successful insurance lawyers,” Maniloff says. “They were all very successful lawyers with incredible careers, but I saw that many of their stories had a lot of similarity. I wanted to tell stories about lawyers who were more unique.” On a hunch Maniloff contacted Alan Page. Page played for 15 seasons in the National Football League – mainly with the Minnesota Vikings – and was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. While playing football, Page went to law school. He hung up his cleats and went on to serve for 23 years on the Minnesota Supreme Court.

“Alan Page is the quintessential unique lawyer,” Maniloff says. “I contacted him and asked if I could interview him.” The justice said yes. The interview went great, the light bulb went off, and interviews about insurance were in the rear view mirror. Since then, Maniloff has gone on to interview many more household-name lawyers: Ralph Nader, Robert Shapiro, Mark Geragos, Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., sports agent Leigh Steinberg (the real Jerry Maguire), legendary law professor Arthur Miller, Laurence Tribe and many more.

Maniloff doesn’t write “gotcha” pieces. “I’m not Mike Wallace,” he says. “I’m not looking for an exposé. Far from it. I steer far away from controversy. I just want to write profiles of lawyers that have done things that no others have. I want to tell their unique stories.” Maniloff points to Frank Shorter as a perfect example. Shorter won the Gold Medal in the marathon at the 1972 Munich Olympics. “Shorter did this while he was in law school,” Maniloff says incredulously. [Shorter won the Silver in 1976 at Montreal.] “Frank had such a great story to tell. He mentioned that he likes to run on an elliptical machine. I said ‘me too.’ And then I felt so silly discussing my exercise routine with the man credited with creating the running boom in America.”

Maniloff has no journalism experience or schooling

whatsoever. “It has just been trial and error and learning as I go,” he says. “But like everything else, if you are prepared it is a lot easier.” Maniloff spends a significant amount of time getting ready for the interviews: “These are very busy and successful people. They have agreed to be interviewed for an obscure insurance newsletter. I owe it to them to be super-prepared and for it to be an enjoyable conversation.”

But no matter how prepared he is, Maniloff says that there is no way to prevent being nervous. “I get a knot in my stomach before every interview,” he groans. He says that he was most nervous before his interview with Brendan Sullivan, counsel to Oliver North and Washington D.C.’s “Toughest Lawyer,” according to the *Washingtonian*. “The knot in my stomach would have impressed an Eagle Scout. I couldn’t rid my head of the images of him, during the Iran-Contra hearings, practically turning the inquisitors into witnesses. But Sullivan could not have been nicer. And unlike the Iran-Contra hearings, he didn’t object to any questions.”

Maniloff points out that the time needed to prepare for and write the interviews, and put together the rest of each issue, takes up billable hours. But he says that he can justify it. “The exposure that I get from the newsletter generates a healthy amount of insurance coverage business for me and others in my firm,” he says. “As a marketing tool, CO more than pays for itself.” Maniloff also uses the newsletter to sell an insurance coverage book that he published with Oxford University Press. “The newsletter is not monetized per se,” he says, “but at the end of the day it has a monetary aspect.”

Maniloff doesn’t have a biggest “get.” He says that when you are an obscure insurance newsletter every interview is a big get. And he isn’t sure who has been his best interview. “There have been so many great ones. Spending an hour in former mob lawyer turned Las Vegas Mayor Oscar Goodman’s office was pretty neat.” Goodman is originally from Philadelphia. “To try to convince him to let me visit I offered to bring Tastykakes. He said forget the Tastykakes and bring him Goldenberg’s Peanut





Chews. I brought him a case.”

At the same time that CO was launched, Maniloff decided to try his hand at stand-up comedy. “I saw an ad for an open mic at Helium on Sansom Street and said ‘what the heck,’” Maniloff shrugs. “I had a few jokes floating around in my head that I’d written. I polished them up and went on stage for three minutes.” Maniloff says that he got some laughs and found the experience exhilarating and wanted to continue. “But I had no idea what I was doing.” He signed up for stand-up comedy classes at Helium and says that it made a huge difference. “Nobody can teach you to be funny,” he says with certainty, “but stand-up involves a lot of technique and knowing that makes a huge difference.”

Maniloff, performing under the stage name Randy Spencer, tells no lawyer jokes. “I don’t even say that I’m a lawyer. As a comedian you need to connect with the audience. Saying that you are a lawyer is not going to do that.” Maniloff calls himself a “wife joke specialist.” “About 90 percent of my jokes are about my wife and my marriage. But my wife does not mind one bit. She gets a kick out of it.” Maniloff is quick to point out that he works hard not to offend people with his jokes. “Some of my jokes may be crude,” he says, “but the only people I offend are my wife and myself.”

Maniloff beat out 19 other comedians to win WMGK’s John DeBella Stand-Up Comedy Competition. “That was a huge thrill. I won a thousand dollars, got to open for a big-time comedian at Helium and they gave me a giant trophy.” Maniloff points to the trophy as the best of the prizes. “When you are 5’4” and Jewish you don’t win too many trophies,” he says, smiling.

These days Maniloff does his stand-up routine on New Talent Showcases at Gotham Comedy Club in New York. “Gotham is a great club, the audiences are big, even during the week, and you never know what could happen there,” Maniloff says. At a show in late 2015, superstar comedian Jim Gaffigan showed up unannounced to work on some new material. “I went on before him so I now tell people that I opened for Jim Gaffigan.

Well, I did.”

Maniloff also incorporates stand-up comedy into CO. Each issue has a column called Randy Spencer’s Open Mic. He looks at the lighter side of insurance or makes up summaries of outlandish judicial decisions. “They are completely fabricated, but sometimes people think they are real. I get emails from people asking about them.” Maniloff points to an Open Mic column that he did in May 2014, where he discussed a recent decision, from the New Hampshire Supreme Court, holding that a six-pack of Diet Coke counts as six items for purposes of the express check-out line at the supermarket. “Come on. The decision could not possibly be real. But people were looking for copies of the opinion because they couldn’t find it on the court’s website,” Maniloff jokes. The ABA Journal website did a story about the confusion that the Open Mic column used.

Maniloff’s favorite combination of CO and stand-up grew out of an interview that he did with renowned New York divorce lawyer Raoul Felder. “Talk about a lawyer with an incredible story,” Maniloff says. Felder is very close with comedian Jackie Mason and the two have co-written some books. “I asked Felder if he could arrange for me to speak with Jackie Mason to get his thoughts on Felder. Three days later my phone rang. The voice on the other end said ‘Hi, this is Jackie Mason calling.’ My heart skipped a beat.”

In an era where stories about lawyer dissatisfaction are *de rigueur*, Maniloff says he couldn’t be happier – even if that meant giving up the brass ring of partnership in a big firm.

Make no mistake. While Maniloff has a lot going on besides practicing law, he never forgets his principal job. “I am a lawyer. And I am thankful that I have great clients and a really nice book of business. And even though I write a newsletter and do stand-up comedy, the ones at the center of the stage are my clients.” ■

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