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CHICAGO BUSINESS®

CHICAGOBUSINESS.COM | JUNE 9, 2014

SHIA KAPOS TAKES NAMES



A lawyer looks for blue under the white collar

When job candidates armed with fancy degrees and references meet with trial attorney **Rick Hammond** of Johnson & Bell Ltd., they're often surprised by one question: What blue-collar jobs have you held?

"My dad spent 32 years as a skycap for United Airlines. It was a time when"—he pauses to stay composed—"when it wasn't easy for men of his age and ethnicity. He would come home every day and take off a back brace and put a pile of coins on the dresser. They were tips. Every day, there was a pile of coins. Today, when I use a skycap, I overtip. I just have the greatest respect for blue-collar workers."

Breaking a sweat on the job gives you a better understanding of "a day's work for a day's pay," he says. Attorneys with that experience "are more likely to be willing to roll up their sleeves."

An equity shareholder at Chicago-based Johnson, Mr. Hammond represents insurance companies, counting State Farm Insurance Cos., Liberty Mutual Group and Travelers Cos. as clients, and serves as general counsel to nonprofit and government entities. His firm has 110 attorneys, including some in Crown Point, Indiana.

In his Loop office, Mr. Hammond talks about how blue-collar work shaped his own career.

"I was a busboy, a stockboy and I worked at United Parcel Service. When you talk about life lessons, I remember putting boxes on trucks during summer breaks from college. I remember looking around and seeing people who were doing this because they had to, and I knew I didn't want to make a living of it," he says.

Getting a college degree wasn't easy.

"I was a consummate C student," says Mr. Hammond, 62, a native of Chicago's South Side and graduate of Hales Franciscan High School, where he has served on the board. "I had been told over and over that 'if you just apply yourself . . .,' but I never really believed it."

By the time he was a junior at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, Mr. Hammond had his most difficult classes ahead of him. "I was forced to study," he recalls. "I got A's and B's. It surprised me. And I thought I would apply myself in other ways."

He studied Spanish and earned a bachelor's degree in design before holding various jobs in the insurance industry. Mr.

Hammond became head of the Illinois Department of Insurance's Chicago office. Later, he earned a law degree from John Marshall Law School, graduating at age 37.

Today, he's handling legal cases in six states. He represented Hales Franciscan in a high-profile teen sexting scandal, and he is general counsel at the Harvey Park District, which was in the news last month when the city's mayor closed a gun range over safety concerns. The park district says the closure was politically motivated.

When he's not poring over the piles of papers that fill his office, Mr. Hammond, who's married and father of a grown daughter, scours auction sites, looking to add to his collection of slavery-era documents and artifacts and post-Civil War memorabilia.

Understanding history, he says, gives perspective on his work. "It shows how our problems today are sometimes not as big as we think they are."

Mr. Hammond owns slave receipts and a tag that was worn by a slave in South Carolina who was rented out to other landowners.

"The tag was proof that the slave owner had paid his taxes for the renting out of a slave," says Mr. Hammond, who also owns a copy of "The Negro Travelers' Green Book." He calls it the bible for any African-American traveling across the United States during the 1950s and '60s. "It listed all the places that would welcome them, whether it was hotels or gas stations or restaurants," says Mr. Hammond, who does pro bono work for the Center for Black Genealogy, based in Chicago. "It guided them to places where blacks were accepted."



Rick Hammond

AWAY FROM THE OFFICE

- ▶ Mr. Hammond plays jazz piano
- ▶ Has traveled to nearly 20 Caribbean islands
- ▶ Collects slavery-era relics

Contact: skapos@crain.com