

Sills Celebrates in Civic-Minded Fashion

Firm anniversary brings together law, business, government and policy

MCC INTERVIEW: Max Crane, Peter Verniero and Beth Rose / Sills Cummis & Gross P.C.

Sills Cummis & Gross recently celebrated its 45th anniversary with a gala reception featuring political commentators David Axelrod and Michael Murphy as befits the firm's commitment to government service and civic affairs. Sills Managing Partner, Max Crane, and two of its practice leaders, Peter G. Verniero and Beth S. Rose, recently spoke with MCC about the event, the firm's roots and its future. Their remarks have been edited for length and style.

MCC: *As your recent 45th anniversary celebration demonstrates, the firm's lawyers have long been mainstays in state and national politics, government and civic affairs. Tell us about your roots and what they mean for the firm today and tomorrow.*

Crane: Historically, this firm has operated at the intersection of law, public policy, business and government. Those aren't just words. The firm was founded 45 years ago by Clive Cummis, a significant state and national power broker, and Arthur Sills, the former attorney general of New Jersey. At a time where there were few large firms, they put together a firm designed to be full service, handling the full range of corporate, litigation and regulatory work. Most important, they envisioned a firm that would be involved broadly in government. That meant hiring people coming out of government and working with people going into government.

MCC: *Can you give us a few examples?*

Crane: Clive Cummis represented Jim Florio, who was running for governor against Tom Kean, in a recount election. Kean won, but Florio ultimately won one of the next general elections. To this day, 45 years later, we continue to emphasize the importance of

not just community service but government service. There are so many regulatory aspects to business that unless you understand how government works, you're going to miss the boat on behalf of your clients.

To give a more recent example, we brought on Peter Verniero, former state attorney general. Back in the day, Arthur Sills, a Democrat, served as state attorney general, and now Peter, a Republican, also served as attorney general – and sat on the New Jersey Supreme Court. As you can see, we're bipartisan. That's hard to find these days.

A few years ago, we brought on Jerry Zaro, the only cabinet official to serve in both the Corzine and Christie administrations. He was officially denoted Chief of the Office of Economic Growth, and as "economic czar" of the state, he was responsible for keeping and attracting business. When he was leaving government, Jerry was looking for a firm that respected the interaction between public policy, government, law and business. He's been a great addition ever since.

MCC: *Tell us about your 45th anniversary.*

Crane: As we started looking at it, we were trying to find an apt way to celebrate. Many of our clients are businesses that interface with government. They have a significant interest in understanding how government institutions work and how officials generally think, and in making sure they have the ability to properly present their cases to government officials, as needed. This year, with interest in government and politics as high as ever, we thought it would be an appropriate connection between the firm, our 45th anniversary and our clients' interest in business and government to get two very interesting and informed speakers to make a presentation for us. Coincidentally, we were also about to elect our 45th President. We chose David Axelrod, President Obama's former campaign chairman

and a senior political commentator on CNN, and Mike Murphy, a political consultant and former adviser to Mitt Romney and Jeb Bush, among others, who serves as a commentator on NBC's *Meet the Press* and the *TODAY* show. He also has a New Jersey connection having worked with former Governor Christine Todd Whitman. He was involved in elections that were critical to this state.

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– Max Crane

We decided to tie together our historic roots, our current lawyers, who have the same knowledge and respect for government, and our clients in a celebratory event. As I said in my introductory remarks, the names change, the political parties change and the backgrounds change, but what doesn't change is our full confidence that we're going to be following the same approach for the next 45 years.

MCC: *As a new generation comes along, how do you assure your commitment to government continues?*

Crane: We've built a reputation around not just being good lawyers providing great service, but being broadly involved in government and

Sills Cummis & Gross P.C.



Max Crane is the Managing Partner of Sills Cummis & Gross. He can be reached at mcrane@sillscummis.com.

the political process. Our clients are regulated directly by the state, local or federal governments, and some of them have issues or situations where their business has to interface with government institutions and officials. We've always viewed that as a critical piece of our overall practice. We've had people working here who were campaign chairs for Senate candidates, congressmen, commissioners of banking and insurance, mayors, judges – the list goes on and on. You can find plenty of firms with good lawyers, plenty of firms with great clients, plenty of firms with stellar service, but you're not going to find it all in one firm plus this other piece that enhances not just our reputation but also our ability to deliver insightful service to our clients.

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– Peter Verniero

The next generation gets it. They understand that they have to be part of the business-government community, and that as a firm we have to take in people who have served in the government. Politics and government can sometimes carry a dirty connotation, especially as seen in the last six months or so. But the fact is that there are a lot of smart, honest and high-quality individuals who serve in all branches of government. We've been able to find very strong lawyers, many of whom have gone in and out of government. Look at Peter, an attorney general and a Supreme Court justice who joined us in his forties – the prime of his professional life. That's a very rare combination. Many former officials in law firms are retired or semi-retired. Or take

Jerry Zaro, who joined us in his fifties. He'd run a law firm and took time out from his very successful private practice in Monmouth County to enter government service. When it was time to leave government, he joined us. I think this is going to continue for the next 45 years. It's in our DNA.

MCC: As Max mentioned, Peter, you are a symbol of the firm's continuing commitment to great lawyering and government service. Tell us about your decision to join Sills.

Verniero: I served for 10 years in public service in the state executive and judicial branches before joining the firm in 2004. When I decided to return to private practice, I considered a number of firms. I selected Sills, and they selected me – it was a mutual decision – and I could not be more pleased with my decision from many perspectives.

First, the firm consists of many very fine professionals with great clients, who I enjoy representing. It's been a good fit in terms of my particular areas of practice, which are corporate internal investigations and appellate work. The second perspective is one of civic mindedness. The firm encourages its lawyers, including me, to get involved in public service activities. For my part, I participate in various Supreme Court committees as chair and as a member, and I previously served on the board of legal services, among other organizations. The firm could not be more encouraging and supportive of those types of activities.

It's all very consistent, in my view, with the anniversary event because the event was itself tied to a civic event, namely, the presidential election. I thought it was very appropriate that a firm that is so civic-minded would organize and host an event around a national civic event. It underscored the support that the firm traditionally has shown in the area of public service.

MCC: Tell us a little more about your various public service activities.

Verniero: One of the biggest projects I've handled is in the area of continuing legal education (CLE) in New Jersey. New Jersey had been one of only a few states without a

mandatory CLE requirement for lawyers. That changed when the Supreme Court of New Jersey asked me to chair a committee on the subject and to recommend to the court what a CLE program might look like in New Jersey. I chaired the panel, we held public hearings, we received comments from the bar, and we ultimately recommended to the court a detailed program that, in large measure, was accepted and is now part of our mandatory requirement in New Jersey. It was a big undertaking, and the firm was very supportive.

I've always felt incredibly supported by the firm both personally and in terms of business development and our women's initiatives.

– Beth S. Rose

Another example is my prior service as chair of the court's Professional Responsibility Rules Committee, which reviews and recommends the drafting and review of various rules of professional conduct. I also currently serve as vice chair of the court's Civil Practice Committee, which assists the court with both drafting the criminal and civil rules of procedure in New Jersey.

I think my involvement on various committees makes me a better lawyer. I gain knowledge by just being on these committees, and I'd like to think that anytime I can improve my own experiences and knowledge that there's at least an indirect benefit to clients.

The 45th anniversary event itself was insightful. I give a lot of credit to Mr. Axelrod and Mr. Murphy. I found them each to be a person of good humor, and I especially liked the respect they showed for one another's views. At a time when our public dialogue is perhaps not as,



Peter G. Verniero is Chair of the Corporate Internal Investigations and Appellate Practice Groups of Sills Cummis & Gross. He can be reached at pverniero@sillscummis.com.



Beth S. Rose is Chair of the Product Liability Practice Group and a Co-Chair of the Litigation Practice Group of Sills Cummis & Gross. She can be reached at brose@sillscummis.com.

shall we say, tolerant as it should be, these two speakers were quite tolerant and respectful of each other's views. I found that to be very refreshing.

MCC: What are your thoughts on the future trajectory of the firm?

Verniero: You can never predict, I suppose, with entire certainty what the future holds for any institution, but if the past is any indication, this firm will be thriving in the years to come. It's been a successful firm, a well-respected firm, and I think its reputation has only been enhanced. I have every reason to believe that will continue into the future.

MCC: Beth, you've been with Sills for your entire legal career. Tell us what the 45th anniversary celebration meant to you?

Rose: Both the firm's 45-year anniversary and the election were particularly meaningful for me. The event gave me an opportunity to reflect on my professional career at Sills. I started as a summer associate in 1986, joined the firm in 1987, and became a partner in 1998. I am currently the chair of what I consider to be a successful and robust product liability team.

What I would say about the event is that both of the speakers were terrific. They were smart, they were interesting, they were entertaining, and they were provocative. What was so nice about the program was that there could be a discourse with different views in a civilized, constructive, productive and even humorous way. Even though the speakers obviously approached the election and the political issues from different standpoints, they exchanged

views without insulting each other. They obviously respected each other, which was refreshing. I was proud that our firm provided a vehicle for this type of discussion.

MCC: Tell us about some of the ways the firm helped you advance your career, or some of the people who've helped you along the way.

Rose: When I started at Sills I had two mentors, the late Honorable Charles J. (Chuck) Walsh and Barry Epstein. Chuck went on to become one of the most prominent mass tort judges in the state and Barry was a passionate advocate and is a very formidable trial lawyer. They taught me how to litigate – how to be a trial lawyer. I often say that if not for their mentorship and guidance, I would not be where I am today.

I'll give you an example. It was the very first case that I tried. I had been with the firm for only six months, and Barry had a trial in state court in Trenton that I second chaired. In the middle of the trial, he gave me the opportunity to argue all the legal motions. We won the case, prevailed on our counterclaim, and there was a separate trial on punitive damages. Barry allowed me to present the evidence on punitive damages to the jury and do the closing arguments. He let me do that all by myself, and I had just been with the firm for six months! When law students come to the firm to interview, and they're considering whether Sills is the right place for them, I frequently tell that story because I think it reflects the firm's commitment to teaching young lawyers their trade.

I've always felt incredibly supported by the firm both in terms of business development and our women's initiatives. Individually, there came a point when I was interested in doing business development. The firm supported every effort I made, whether it was becoming part of a women's rainmaking or networking group, or helping to organize and lead an internal initiative to build women's rainmaking skills or just improve the camaraderie of women at the firm.

MCC: What's your sense of the firm's future – its trajectory?

Rose: The firm is on a strong upward trajectory. The quality of the cases we're bringing in continues to be sophisticated and challenging. We appreciate the faith our clients place in us to help them work through important issues that impact their businesses. We're in a good place and always looking for the next opportunity.