

ST. LOUIS

CHARACTER

BY JULIA M. JOHNSON

Ask downtown attorney David Weiss what he knows, and he can enlighten you about much more than legal arguments, casework and statutes. He'll also regale you with tales of the theater, backstage production issues and the nuances of theatrical lighting design. That's because in his pre-lawyer life, Weiss planned a colorful career in behind-the-curtain theater work. But the budgetary instability of that field convinced him that working as an attorney might be the ticket to a happier ending.

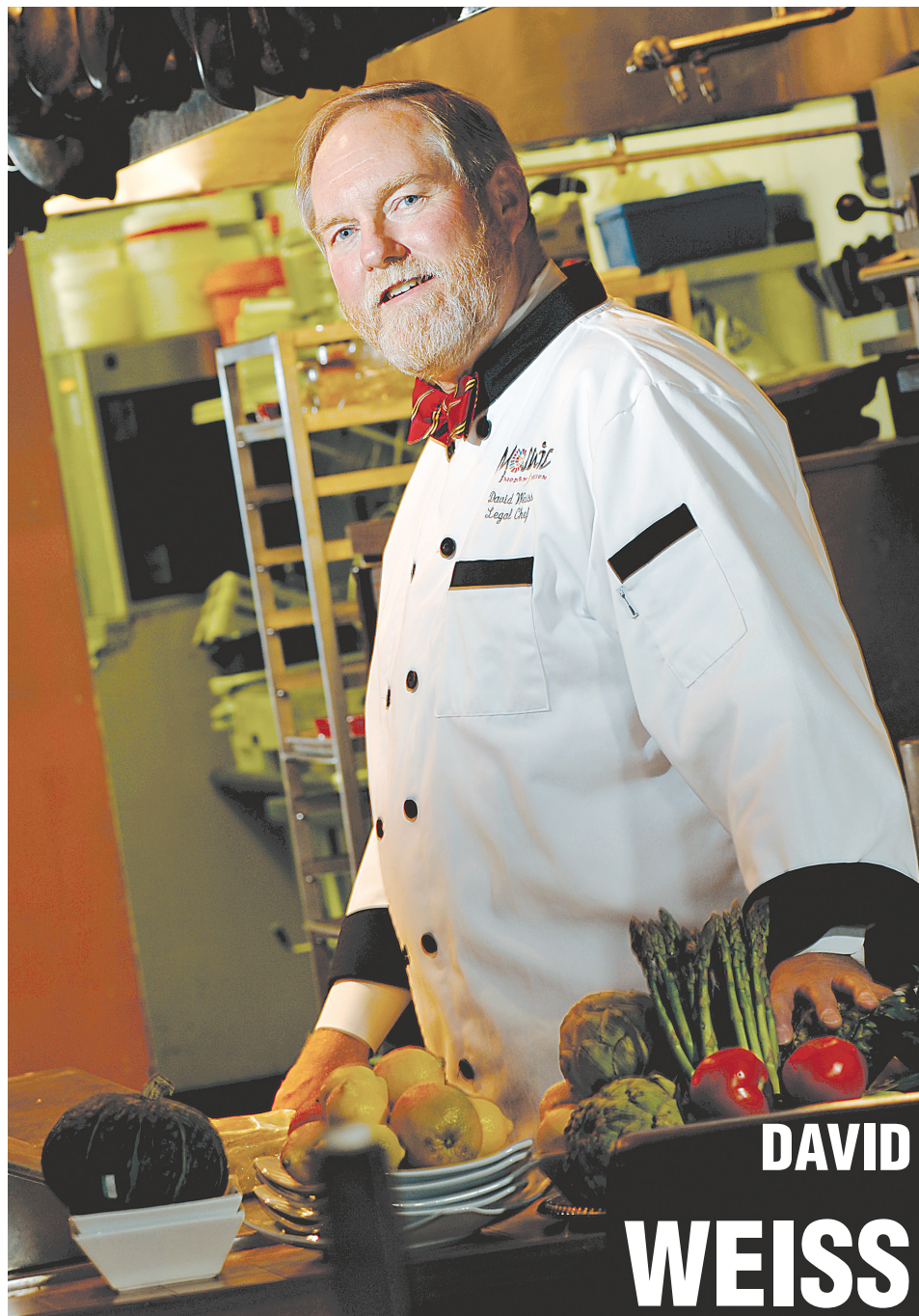
Weiss now has a four-lawyer firm that bears his name, at 1015 Locust St. Clients vary from mom-and-pop shops to companies that do business internationally. He loves to cook, and enjoys volunteering with charitable causes such as the local Shriners Hospital.

His signature bow tie — he wears one every day of the week — has found its way into graphics for his business cards, office holiday greetings and even his waiting-room decor. Weiss views it as his “trademark,” a way of standing out from the rest. “I don’t even know how to tie a Windsor knot,” he said.

Where are you from, and what was your upbringing like?

I’m from St. Louis, south city, down by Carondelet Park. I grew up with five siblings, traditional family. In the ‘50s, there were so many children around in the neighborhood, there was always something to do. Lots of memories, and always mischief to get into. We played basketball, bottle-cap ball, wiffle-ball.

Where did you go to high school and college?



Saint Louis University High School and Webster College. I majored in theater production and design. Lighting design, to be specific. After that I went to the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor for a master's in theater management.

What did you do after finishing your master's?

For six years, I worked in various capacities in theaters. One position was at Connecticut College; I also worked at Actors' Theatre of Louisville, and the Lyceum Theatre in Arrow Rock, Mo. My last theater gig was in Pittsburgh, and that's where I finally got my application in for the University of Pittsburgh School of Law.

Why the leap to law school? Was there an “Aha” moment that took you there?

Yes. In about 1978, I had interviewed for a new (theater) position in New York City. I went to New York to interview, and accepted the position. I came back to St. Louis and loaded up my convertible with everything I owned. I drove back across half the country, pulled up in the circle drive in front of the administration building and went in to meet my contact. She said, “We need to talk. The president of the college has had to reduce the arts budget by 30 percent. Including your salary.”

I had all my stuff with me in a car. I didn’t have a place to stay. The hiring season was really over. But I went ahead with the job for a while even though they cut my salary 30 percent. I thought, “There’s got to be a better way.”

What happened next?

After that was when I went to Pittsburgh, to the Lovelace Marionette Theatre. Then I applied for law school.

How mentally prepared were you to study law?

There were no lawyers in my family at the time. I didn’t even know how to become a lawyer. The theater is great; it satisfied a lot of wanderlust at an early age. But I needed something more secure. And I do love to be challenged.

Talk about your work in the field of law.

My personal interest is corporate and real estate law. We, as a firm, emphasize corporate, commercial, real estate, estate planning and litigation in those areas. I did a number of cases of property condemnation for the city of St. Louis — mostly private homes. We once had to condemn a church. That was an interesting case because it was so emotional.

How much pro bono work are you able to do?

We handle a number of pro bono matters. One project I’m involved in is winding down the Historyonics Theatre Company. I work with Volunteer Lawyers and Accountants for the Arts.

What else appealed to you about law?

In theater management, you’re working with a lot of directors on boards. When I worked with them, there were a lot of real movers and shakers from the business community. Often, it was the lawyers who rose to the top in analyzing opportunities. They directed the discussion. They could analyze the situation, get consensus and move on. That was very impressive to me. I felt I could do that.

What really gets you fired up to go to work in the morning?

Working with a lot of small businesses. Providing a means to help clients realize their dreams. I enjoy figuring out everything from limitation of liability to refinancing. For example, I had a client who wanted to refinance his plant. He said, “What do you think of this deal?” and he sent me the papers on it. I was able to tell him it was the worst deal he could do, and why. I enjoy helping somebody avoid a mistake so they can have the best chance at success.

Was there ever an experience where your legal and theater careers intersected?

I was clerking in Philadelphia and worked on a case where the client hired a company to clean out the vents in an industrial plant. There were wing nuts to get access into the vents, but they couldn’t get the wing nuts off, so they used a blowtorch on them. They were supposed to be cleaning out all the dust, which of course then raced throughout the entire system. There was a major casualty loss

and a big insurance claim.

Later I was talking with the attorney I was assisting, and I said, “Why didn’t they just use a cold chisel to loosen the wing nuts?” He said, “How did you know that? That’s exactly what the expert said.” So I told him, I learned it in technical theater.

When you go into theaters now, do you find yourself critiquing the lighting systems?

All the time. People must think I’m staring because I’m bored, but I’m actually looking at the lighting technology. I ask a million questions.

Lighting is such a powerful way to reinforce a story visually. A set can look great, but a lighting designer can either make it look washed out, or enhance it. The best thing a critic can say about the lighting is nothing. They shouldn’t even know it’s there.

What does your time off usually look like?

I love to go out to eat, and I love to cook. The conversations I’ve had with friends across my dining room table are just phenomenal. We can talk about theology and baseball at the same time. It’s wonderful to entertain and be able to visit.

What do you like to cook?

My specialty is Dave’s Fish Sticks. It’s actually salmon marinated in pure maple syrup, then grilled. I cut it into slices and wrap them in buttered phyllo dough, then they’re baked. You’ve never quite had a fish stick like that.

If you weren’t in law, what would you be doing?

I’d love to be a chef. I could never own a restaurant, though; I’m terrible with portion control. I’d lose my shirt. “Have more,” I’d always be saying.

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