

CERTIFIED SPECIALIST SPOTLIGHT

JOHN FRIES

Celebrating a 30-Year Career

WRITTEN BY SUSAN CUSHING
PHOTOGRAPHED BY ANDREW PAUL

With a practice that combines bankruptcy and public finance, Ryley Carlock & Applewhite attorney John J. Fries has been serving clients for more than 30 years. In reflecting on his legal career, Fries acknowledges that certain themes emerge.

“Pursuing one’s true interests, being open-minded, striving for fairness, focusing on solutions, continuing to grow, and making time for fun are all things I value,” Fries says. “Each step of my career has reflected these themes and principles along the way.”

Fries shares a few highlights from the progression of his 30+ years in the law.

FOLLOW YOUR INTERESTS

Fries’ path to becoming a certified business bankruptcy specialist illustrates the importance of following your interests. He was an accounting major in college and understood the importance of accurate financial records, but didn’t see himself as an accountant. Business law courses drew John to law school. Once in law school, he had the opportunity to study under Judge Aldisert of the Third Circuit Court of Appeals, a highly regarded legal scholar who taught his fellow judges, and luckily for John, also taught three select courses at the University of Pittsburgh.

“These were very small classes held in his chambers,” Fries says. “Judge Aldisert guided us through an exploration of how judges see their role differently, how they decide cases, how precedent is expanded upon, and how sometimes it gets off course before correcting itself. It was different than classes teaching the rules of civil procedure, tax or torts and caused me to look at the law differently.”

Fries knew his next step was to clerk for a judge. While still in law school, John externed with an intermediate appellate court in Pennsylvania, and upon graduation, Fries landed a two-year clerkship with a bankruptcy judge.

“My clerkship coincided with the passage of the Bankruptcy Reform Act,” Fries says. “It made revolutionary changes in bankruptcy law. I started my clerkship when the lawyers and judges were learning the Bankruptcy Code and there weren’t many cases to help us navigate it. For a young guy just out of law school, it was exciting to listen to the evidence, study the new law and discuss the case with my judge. And just as Judge Aldisert had taught, my judge and I sometimes saw cases very differently. I carry that lesson into my practice today: everyone has a different perspective.”

Fries reflects that his two years as a law clerk gave him a great foundation upon entering private practice as a commercial bankruptcy attorney.

“Bankruptcy provided a forum and opportunity to implement a business solution, with the oversight of a judge to guide the restructuring to save businesses, jobs and pay back creditors,” Fries says. “That appealed to my interests, background and sense of fairness. I’m very thankful that I followed where my interests led me.”

In 1988, Fries became one of the first two attorneys in Arizona to be nationally certified as a business bankruptcy specialist; and in 1992, he was recognized as a certified bankruptcy specialist when the Arizona State Bar implemented its certification program. Today, he remains one of only 17 nationally, certified bankruptcy specialists in Arizona recognized by the American Bankruptcy Board.

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LOOK FOR SOLUTIONS

When helping his clients resolve bankruptcy and creditors’ rights issues, Fries focuses on finding solutions.

“Sometimes clients want you to be a gladiator, to fight every battle, but it often drains time, energy and money away from the ultimate goal,” Fries says. “Bankruptcy can be intensely adversarial, and it is easy for those fights to spread to opposing counsel if you let it. I always found that it is much more effective to maintain a professional relationship with opposing counsel so you can work together on a solution.”

By focusing on solutions, Fries played a significant legal role in the Chapter 11 bankruptcies filed in

Arizona by many well-known public companies, including American Continental (Charlie Keating), America West Airlines, Einstein Bagels, Boston Chicken and the Baptist Foundation.

“Those mega cases are engaging,” Fries says. “And I also enjoy the diversity of my practice. I have worked on restructures involving a small railroad, a vineyard, dairies, nursing homes, cotton farms, citrus groves, commercial real estate, resort hotels and small motels. You name a business and I’ve probably worked to restructure it. Unfortunately, Arizona has had its share of fraud and Ponzi schemes that wind up in bankruptcy. These are very intensive and leave many victims behind. It is very gratifying when you can make a distribution to these victims. When I can provide a solution that makes a difference for my clients, that’s what I care about.”

Over his career, Fries represented clients in defaulted bond deals involving hospitals, nursing homes, life care facilities, charter schools and numerous non-profit or-



ganizations. Having dissected and restructured numerous bond issuances, John expanded his practice to become a bond lawyer, working with Ryley Carlock & Applewhite's Bill Wilder.

"Bill, who was selected by Best Lawyers as Public Finance Attorney of the Year in 2018, is a natural teacher and great mentor," Fries says.

RECHARGE IN NATURE

Fries' approach to leisure time mirrors his hard-working, hard-driving Type-A attributes.

"I like getting out in nature," Fries says. "Scuba diving, white water rafting, and backpacking all appeal to me. I used to play a lot of basketball at the Y and in various leagues, but the players kept getting younger and faster, and I couldn't catch them to foul them. My trail running slowed enough that I had to call it hiking, and it took me so long to finish a hike, I had to carry my food and gear so I called it backpacking. You have time to think when you are out in the wilderness and you learn a lot about yourself. For example, in a recent hike through Spooky and Peek-A-Boo slot canyons in Utah, I learned that those slot canyons were designed for a much skinnier person."

Fries and wife Barbara are the parents of three grown daughters. "Enjoying nature and the outdoors is my way of recharging," he says. "It's even better if I can convince one or all of my daughters to join me on my adventures. They like white water rafting and they have joined me on a few of my rafting trips to British Columbia, Costa Rica, Tennessee, West Virginia, Washington, Colorado and California. We still have a few rivers to conquer."

AT A GLANCE

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PRACTICE AREAS

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Public Finance & Bond Counsel

EDUCATION

Juris Doctor, University of Pittsburgh, 1979
Bachelor of Science, Pennsylvania State University,
1976

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

Nationally Certified Business Bankruptcy Specialist,
American Board of Certification, 1988
Certified Bankruptcy Specialist by the Arizona Board
of Legal Specialization, 1992
American Bankruptcy Institute
National Association of Bond Lawyers

HONORS

AV Rating by Martindale-Hubbell
Southwest Super Lawyers, 2010-Present
Best Lawyers in America, 2010-Present
Arizona's Finest Lawyers