

# NAMES IN THE NEWS

## LAWYER OF THE WEEK

# Taking 'entrepreneurial leap of faith' pays off

MICHAEL RAPPAPORT TORONTO

Martin Perelmuter is the president and co-founder of Speakers' Spotlight — an agency that represents hundreds of inspirational, thought-provoking and dynamic speakers — but he used to be too shy to take centre stage.

"Growing up I was slightly terrified of speaking up in a classroom setting," Perelmuter confides. He adds, "Some people are born with the gift of gab while others develop the ability over time."

Perelmuter no longer shuns the spotlight. He has been a guest lecturer at the University of Toronto, Ryerson University, George Brown College and Centennial College and a speaker at the Canadian Student Leadership Conference, Advancing Canadian Entrepreneurship and Young Inventors International.

Originally, Perelmuter, a grad of York University's Osgoode Hall Law School, began his career as a corporate lawyer on Bay Street. But Perelmuter had an entrepreneurial streak. After a brief career in law, in June 1995, Perelmuter and his wife Farah, who was in marketing and had helped her uncle promote his seminars, decided to launch an agency to represent speakers.

Together they spent six months researching the business before they both quit their jobs and took the "entrepreneurial leap of faith."

"We were 25 years young and had no kids and no mortgage at the time," Perelmuter recalls. They also had "no speakers, no office, no staff and no experience." But they were full of "enthusiasm and belief" that their venture would be successful.

To get the business off the ground, Perelmuter and his wife cultivated contacts among meeting and events planners at associations, corporations and institutions.

"The first year we made 75 cold calls each day," Perelmuter says. "The challenge was getting our foot in the door." Despite the discouragement of facing daily rejections, they kept going. Persistence paid



Martin Perelmuter

off. Business tripled in revenue from year one to year two.

Initially, they managed 18 speakers, including: Jack Donahue, who was the head coach of the Canadian national men's basketball team for 17 years; Canadian hockey legend Paul Henderson, who scored the "goal of the century" at the 1972 Winter Olympics; and, Rubin Carter a.k.a. "the Hurricane," a former champion boxer, who was wrongfully convicted and incarcerated for murder in the 1960s.

Today, the agency represents over 600 speakers ranging from former Canadian prime ministers, to best-selling authors, to leading business entrepreneurs, to champion Olympic athletes. From working in a home office, the Perelmutes now have a head office in Toronto near the CN Tower and satellite offices in Vancouver, Calgary and Ottawa.

Although Speakers' Spotlight represents hundreds of speakers, Perelmuter says they have a roster of 60 to 80 speakers who get regular bookings while others speak much less frequently. Top speakers in Canada can earn from \$5,000 to \$25,000 per speaking engagement. South of the border, some speakers, most notably certain former U.S. presidents, may command six-figures-plus in speaking fees.

Getting paid speaking gigs isn't easy. "We turn down about 99 percent of speakers who approach the firm seeking representation," Perelmuter says. Speakers must have recognized expertise on a subject area of interest and an inspirational life story and/or significant accomplishments to draw an audience. And of course, they have to have speaking skills.

"The real test of speaking skills is whether the speaker gets a bigger ovation at the beginning or end of a speech," Perelmuter observes.

Since 1997 the agency has shone the spotlight on some of their brightest speakers at their annual "Speakers Showcase." The event is free for clients who are encouraged to contribute to a charitable fund. The fund has been used to support different charities each year such as the Special Olympics, the Make-A-Wish Foundation and Free the Children. Four years ago Speakers' Spotlight used the money raised from the annual fundraiser and promotional event to adopt a village in the Maasai Mara region of rural Kenya. "We built a school, bought books and hired teachers," Perelmuter says.

Speakers' Spotlight represents about a dozen prominent lawyers, or former lawyers, on its roster including Leonard Brody, the best-selling author and business visionary, David Ben, a master magician and creative problem-solver and Sahar Hashemi, the co-founder of the U.K.-based coffee chain, Coffee Republic.

For lawyers/aspiring speakers, Perelmuter offers three pointers: "Do not use PowerPoint, do not stand behind the podium and above all tell a story."

What separates the good speakers from the great speakers?

"A good speaker tells a good story, a great speaker tells a good story but puts their audience into the story." ■

## MOVES

■ In Toronto *Baker & McKenzie LLP* has expanded its insolvency and restructuring practice with the addition of a three-partner team to its Toronto office. As *The Lawyers Weekly* already reported the international law firm lured Chris Besant away from *Cassels, Brock & Blackwell LLP* to chair its Canadian financial restructuring and recovery practice. Now **Frank Spizzirri** and **Lydia Salvi**, also previously with Cassels, Brock & Blackwell, have officially joined Besant over at Baker & McKenzie. Spizzirri's practice involves all aspects of bankruptcy and insolvency work, with a particular focus on litigation and adversarial proceedings. While Salvi's practice focuses on corporate restructurings, distressed merger and acquisition transactions, and secured financings. The three additions all have a broad range of experience across many industries and have been involved in many of Canada's largest insolvency matters. Meanwhile **David Whitten** and **Daniel Lublin** have formed a new partnership, aptly named *Whitten & Lublin LLP*. The boutique employment law firm has also added **Alyssa Minsky** to round out its three-person team. Minsky, previously with *Elia Associates*, is a senior associate practising exclusively in employment and human rights law. *Wilson Vukelich LLP* has added two new lawyers: **Jagruti Gandhi** and **Christine Ashton**. Gandhi joins as counsel and will practise in estates and tax law. Ashton joins as an associate and will practise in commercial litigation and labour and employment law.

■ In Vancouver **Matthew Ely** joins *Clark Wilson LLP* as an associate. Ely joins the firm's commercial real estate, corporate & commercial and private company transaction groups. **Michael Blatchford** has joined *Bull, Housser & Tupper LLP* as an associate with the trusts and estates group.

■ In Montreal *Fasken Martineau Dumoulin LLP* welcomes four new lawyers. **Jean-Philippe Guay** will join the firm's litigation group, **Charles Lupien** the intellectual property group, while **Caitlin Rose** and **Bradley Massi** will be joining

the business group. These young lawyers all previously articulated at Fasken Martineau.

## APPOINTMENTS

■ *WeirFoulds LLP* litigation partner **Frank Walwyn** has been appointed to the Ontario Judicial Appointments Advisory Committee. The committee plays an instrumental role in the appointment of Ontario Provincial Court judges and is independent of the Ministry of the Attorney General and the Ontario government. Walwyn is one of three lawyers on the 13-person committee. Walwyn is very active in the legal community. He is also the president of the Canadian Association of Black Lawyers, director of The Advocates' Society and member of the board of Community Legal Education Ontario.

## CASE FILE

■ In a move reminiscent of the classic grade school punishment of writing out lines on a chalkboard a judge has sentenced a senior pharmaceutical executive to write — a book. U.S. District Judge Ricardo Urbina in Washington recently handed out the unique sentence to former Bristol-Myers Squibb Co. executive Andrew Bodnar, according to *The New York Times*. Bodnar had pleaded guilty to making a false statement to federal officials about Bristol-Myers' attempts to delay generic competition for its lucrative blood thinner Plavix. The judge sentenced Bodnar to write a book about his experiences connected to the case, plus two years probation and a \$5,000 fine (all figures U.S.), says the *Times*. This is not the first time Bodnar has meted out written punishment. In 1998 he sentenced a Washington lobbyist to write a monograph. The lobbyist then had to distribute the monograph describing the criminal provisions of federal laws governing corporate campaign contributions to 2,000 lobbyists at the defendant's expense. The lobbyist, who pleaded guilty to making illegal corporate campaign contributions, was also ordered to pay a \$150,000 fine, noted the paper.

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