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High Drama, High Crimes, High Tech Made For Busy 2006

By Claude Solnik

Two-thousand-six was a tough year for Long Island executives, plenty of whom were forced to flee the U.S. or were led off in irons. For former Converse boss Kobi Alexander (arrested in Namibia on backdating charges), one time CA chief Sanjay Kumar (sentenced to 12 years in \$2.2 billion accounting fraud) and ex-Symbol CEO Tomo Razmilovic (last sighted in Sweden), 2006 was a year to forget.

But it was a year to remember for Long Island lawyers, and not only because they played an integral role in these and many other accounting scandals. Whether it was pro bono heroism, precedent-setting trial work or, yes, hardy defense of corporate swindlers, Island attorneys had a busy '06 - and things show no signs of slowing as the new year dawns.

"The law business, as far as I can see, is terrific," said Bernard Hyman, managing partner at Certilman Balin Adler & Hyman in East Meadow. "Our clients are very active. We're busier than ever."

Practice areas aplenty

Long Island, obviously, generated more than its share of corporate fraud cases in 2006; stay tuned for how these play out in 2007 and beyond.

"They're hopefully at the finishing stages, so to speak," said Charles Strain, managing partner at Farrell Fritz in Uniondale, of Long Island company scandals. "That's not going to be the theme for 2007 and going forward."

But if the corporate scandals are winding down - and that's not necessarily the case, with the federal government's new focus on backdating scams - other practice areas are heating up. Patent law was in fashion in 2006, as Island firms not only pursued big ideas but filed paperwork to claim them.

"Everyone wants to protect their intellectual property," said Bill Savino, managing partner at Rivkin Radler in Uniondale, "whether it's the toy industry or the pharmaceutical industry or the printing industry."

Robert Wild, chairman of Garfunkel, Wild & Travis in Great Neck, called intellectual property "a huge industry from a law standpoint and commercially." Such statements are

mirrored by the actions of Garden City firm Scully, Scott, Murphy & Presser, an IP ace that hired four patent agents and attorneys in 2006 to keep up with demand.

"We foresee growth throughout [2007]," said Scully Scott partner Paul Esatto, noting the firm plans to hire two more IP attorneys by early next year.

Commercial litigation, health care, land use, environmental and employment law were also hot practice areas in 2006, while real estate law proved to be a two-sided coin - the Island's commercial market remained strong, but the residential market cooled.

"Law firms that do a lot of real estate work, such as we do, are affected by the market," said Jeff Forchelli, managing partner at Mineola-based Forchelli, Curto, Schwartz, Mineo, Carlino & Cohn. "And the market is soft."

Employment law remained a hot, growing practice area with lawyers weighing in on issues such as overtime regulations, while small companies turned to their lawyers for help churning out new employee handbooks and the Sarbanes Oxley Act of 2002 and other legislation "have created some additional regulatory work," according to Hyman.

Some specialty practices experienced slow-downs. Personal bankruptcy went into a cool period after bankruptcy laws requiring counseling and means testing went into effect last year.

"Not too many people that have to do with bankruptcy have much to do at the present time," said Leslie Berkoff, a partner at Moritt Hock Hamroff & Horowitz in Garden City. "A lot of people have probably been scared from filing."

Moving and shaking

Although major corporations such as KeySpan, North Fork and Symbol all reached deals in 2006 to merge with larger firms, law firms weren't bitten by the merger bug - with one exception: merger bug - with one exception: Groman, Ross & Tisman PC's five attorneys (three partners and two associates) in July joined Forchelli, Curto, Schwartz, Mineo,

Carlino & Cohn.

That's not to say there weren't any prominent shifts at the helms of major Island law firms. Douglas A. Cooper and Mark S. Mulholland, for instance, became co-managing partners at Uniondale's Ruskin Moscou Faltischek.

While largely avoiding mergers, several Island law firms did expand into new offices, both on Long Island and off.

After 27 years in Mineola, Meyer, Suozzi, English & Klein set up shop at 999 Stewart Ave. in Garden City (the new site offered serious technical upgrades, such as wireless Internet access). Rivkin Radler kept its Uniondale office, but took more prominent space in Manhattan at 555 Madison Ave. and also expanded its New Jersey office in Hackensack. Great Neck's Garfunkel Wild - which opened a Hackensack office four years ago - in 2006 expanded into Stamford, Conn.

Island law firms even looked abroad, responding to a global economy that sometimes resulting in lawsuits without borders.

"Globalization is upon us," Savino said. "The last couple of years, we've been sending lawyers to faraway places, to London or Bermuda, to deal with insurance in the legal arena. We send lawyers to the Far East for product liability cases."

Stay tuned

While organic growth was the name of the game for many law firms, many had to decide in 2006 whether to add new practice areas or hone in on specialties.

"It continues to be a changing marketplace, in terms of the types of practice areas that might be very active in a particular year," Strain noted.

Savino warned there's a risk that goes with adding new practice areas: Firms can stray from their strengths and dilute their brand.

"You should tell the world what you're famous for," the Rivkin Radler managing partner said. "Let the consuming public understand that their real good in the area, whatever it may be - litigation, corporate transactions, real estate."