



Top of the (Legal) Mountain

Having found his calling on a South Asian summit, lauded White Plains attorney Russell Yankwitt has dedicated himself and his career to making an impact while realizing that elusive work-life balance.

By Tom Schreck

▲ Russell Yankwitt (center), with partners, leaving the courtroom.

It was on a mountain-climbing excursion in Nepal that Russell Yankwitt decided to become an attorney. He was on a break from his teaching duties in Japan, where he led classes in English for Japanese schoolchildren. After growing up in Briarcliff Manor and graduating from Connecticut College, he set out to experience some of the diversity the world had to offer.

"We were in the Himalayas. I had a degree in psychology and economics, and I met these five climbers who were working on revising the constitution for Nepal," Yankwitt says. "It was right there that I realized how much I could help people by becoming a lawyer."

A law career wasn't a stretch. His dad and his two brothers had all earned their J.D. degrees, but law wasn't what Yankwitt had envisioned for his own career after finishing college. After all, his personal mission centered on serving others.

"I took the LSATs in Japan. I didn't have up-to-date books, so I studied outdated ma-

terials. I took the test, sitting on the floor in a hallway, after not getting any sleep the night before. They were the worst conditions you could imagine, and I was totally relaxed because I had no expectations of how I'd do," Yankwitt recalls. "I guess that was the perfect attitude, because I scored really high."

He did well enough to get into Cornell, his dad and brothers' law-school alma mater. Yankwitt may have been a bit of a legacy student, but he was, and remains, his own man.

"Cornell is a special place; I loved it there," he says. "My brother was a bit of a partier, and we look quite a bit alike. I was a quieter student, but I'd get tackled into snowbanks by older guys who were roughhousing and thought I was my brother."

Born in Massapequa but raised in Briarcliff, Yankwitt is the son of a schoolteacher and a high-powered attorney. His career has brought him to clerking for a federal judge, Thomas Platt, to the prestigious New York City firm of Skadden, Arps, Slate,

"We provide the same litigation services you'd get from a prestigious NYC firm, only in Westchester, and that's not just lip service. And we do it at a fraction of NYC costs."

— Russell Yankwitt
Founder & Partner,
Yankwitt LLP

“[Russell] really cares and has respect for people and family.... In my 12 years with the firm, I’ve never missed a soccer game. As long as the work gets done, he doesn’t care.”

— Dina Hamerman
Partner, Yankwitt LLP

Meagher and Flom LLP, and to the position of assistant United States attorney in the Southern District of New York.

In 2009, he set out to start his own firm in Westchester County.

“I literally began the firm at my kitchen table. It was 2009, and my wife and I had our son, Aden, and we were in the process of adopting a second child, with special needs, from Taiwan,” Yankwitt says. “From my kitchen table, I hit the street and had meetings every day — breakfast, lunch, and dinner.”

These days, Yankwitt LLP occupies a 6,000 sq. ft. office on the seventh floor of 140 Grand Street in White Plains and is considered by many to be the premier litigation firm in the county. It is not an accident: It comes from a strategy Yankwitt designed in addressing a gap he identified in the county. “We’re successful because Westchester did not have a power litigation firm,” says Yankwitt, who’s made the New York Metro Super Lawyers list since 2011, the Top 25 Westchester County Super Lawyers since 2013, Best Lawyers in America 2020-

2021, and earned an AV Preeminent rating by Martindale-Hubbell. Prominent clients include Landry’s Inc., Regeneron Pharmaceuticals, and Ace Endico.

“I recruited fantastic attorneys, many from big New York City firms, and pounded the pavement every day. Four of five New York partners are former assistant United States attorneys, and all of my attorneys clerked for federal judges. We provide the same litigation services you’d get from a prestigious New York City firm, and we do it at a fraction of New York City costs,” Yankwitt explains.

That teacher/attorney upbringing seeps into everything he does. He’s able to get the attorneys from elite Manhattan firms because of what he offers. Sure, the compensation is part of it, but it is also the chance to actually practice in the courtroom and — and this is a big *and* — have a life.

“Big New York City lawyers, even the most respected, rarely have the opportunity to try cases because so few big law firms actually take cases to trial,” Yankwitt says. “Here, our attorneys do that, and teaching courtroom skills is one of my favorite things in this position.”

The other attractive component to a career at the firm is the unique culture Yankwitt has built.

“We wanted a firm that was like a family. There’s no doubt our staff puts in the hours, but we wanted it designed so that they could have family time, see the kids’ games, and have lives. When you work in litigation, that usually isn’t the case,” Yankwitt says.

This need for work/life balance is something Yankwitt gets on a personal level.

“When my wife and I were first married, she was in her residency at Brooklyn Medical Center, and I was working at Skadden. I like to say it was perfect, because neither of us was ever home,” Yankwitt laughs.

In order to create the environment he wanted, Yankwitt needed to invest in a workplace and infrastructure that was focused on mobility and flexibility. That meant being way ahead of the curve when it came to the technology that allowed the staff to make anywhere their workstations. Long before the pandemic sent us all to laptops, Google Meets, Webex, and Zoom, Yankwitt LLP was built for mobile work.

“From the very beginning, I overinvested in technology,” Yankwitt says. “Because of that, staff are capable of getting home at a reasonable hour or choosing to work from home, so they can still enjoy their families. Technology has enabled the firm to continue to cultivate its family-like atmosphere, with Zoom meetings, lunches, keeping everyone connected during the pandemic.”

“Before Russ brought me on, I worked for a very big NYC firm. I worked hard, and it was almost impossible to strike a balance between



Maintaining a strong work-life balance is important to Yankwitt, who makes time for fun outings like paint night (above) and activities with his wife and kids (right).



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Because of the community's generous support, Feeding Westchester is still distributing record-breaking pounds of food throughout the county during this time of continued, unprecedented need. From March through August of this year, we put nearly 11 million meals onto the tables of our neighbors who are struggling, many of whom had to ask for help for the very first time. Together we are feeding Westchester.

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work and life," confirms Yankwitt partner Dina Hamerman. "[Russell] really cares and has respect for people and families. He has a mantra that we work hard and demand excellence, but in my 12 years with the firm, I've never missed a soccer game. As long as the work gets done, he doesn't care."

Yankwitt's investment in technology to make the workplace mobile has, of course, paid off big during the pandemic. While others scrambled to catch up so that their staffs could go virtual, Yankwitt was already there. It made the work-from-home shift almost no shift at all. At a time when words like "pivot," "new normal," and "unprecedented times" have become annoyingly cliché, Yankwitt's firm merely had to keep on with what they were already doing. The result was the firm was able to focus on its cases and clients. Tragic as it has been, however, the coronavirus stands to engender an avalanche of activity for the legal profession, an incipient reality not lost on Yankwitt.

"We anticipate a wave of contract and commercial real estate litigation as businesses seek to get out of or enforce their obligations under agreements and leases," Yankwitt says. "We also anticipate a slew of insurance coverage disputes as business owners attempt to get reimbursed under their business-interruption policies. No one ever interpreted how this coverage applies to a pandemic with a government-ordered shutdown. There will also be a wave of bankruptcy filings that will keep bankruptcy and litigation attorneys busy for years to come."

Outside the office, Yankwitt admits that finding his own work/life balance can be a bit of a challenge. Between the firm and his family, there just isn't a lot of spare time.

"I have to admit, I haven't read a book for leisure in years... maybe since I read the *Harry Potter* books with my son. He and I play tennis, and we hike with [my daughter] Shayna. Since we've put in a pool, much of our family time has been spent there, but I often struggle to find time for recreation," he explains.

Now 15, Aden just started 10th grade, and Shayna Mei, 12, is in seventh grade. Wife Deborah is a longtime pediatrician. They met on a blind date that a friend set up. "Our first date was a Garth Brooks/Billy Joel concert in Central Park. Oddly enough, both of our parents also met on blind dates," Yanwkitt says.

Perhaps their relationship started on a bit of fortunate happenstance, but the Yankwitts lead lives that are not only focused and driven; they are mission-centered. From their work to their commitment to family, it seems where they are today has little to do with luck. ●

Tom Schreck is a frequent contributor to Westchester Magazine and 914INC. who has written profiles on the likes of Nick Spano and Mike Richter.