

Brown Rudnick's head restructuring lawyer sees the need to stay cool.

By Sarah Coffey, Financial Reporter – May 25, 2012



photo by W. Marc Bernsau

Jeffrey Jonas, chairman of Brown Rudnick's bankruptcy and restructuring practice, has a client roster that includes business magnate Carl Icahn.

Jeffrey Jonas' 1963 Lincoln Continental convertible sports the license plate "MRCOOL." The chairman of Brown Rudnick's hedge fund practice in Boston, as well as the firm's bankruptcy and restructuring practice, Jonas needs to keep his cool amid the high-pressure world of hedge funds that invest in distressed debt.

From his office in Boston, Jonas runs a New York practice. He's on the road more than 100 nights a year, representing clients from all across the country, including key client business magnate Carl Icahn. He also serves on the management committee of Brown Rudnick.

But Jonas, who lives in Sudbury with his wife and three children, almost spent his life in the world of catering. He'd always wanted to go to law school, but when he was a junior at Brandeis University, his father decided to get out of the family's catering business, the Worcester-based New England Canteen Service.

His father and his father's partner decided to hold a Dutch auction to figure out who'd take ownership of the business. Jonas assumed his father would buy it and he'd join him in running it.

"We all expected that was going to result in my dad owning the business, and if that was the case, I probably wouldn't have ended up going to law school, because A, most of my dad's resources would have been applied to the business, and B, I would have ended up helping my dad. Lo and behold, he went in and walked out with a big check. He was done, which was great at 58, and I went to law school," Jonas said.

"Even though I had always wanted to go to law school, that probably would have changed my direction, and so it influenced the direction" of my life, he said.

From high school, Jonas had been interested in "how to fix businesses, work with businesses in trouble, and save fundamental value," he said. When he joined Brown Rudnick in 1988, he was going to split his time between the firm's corporate and bankruptcy practices, but "things started to pick up in the bankruptcy world and I went from there," he said.

Over the last 10 years, investor interest in distressed debt has exploded. Jonas said the market has matured dramatically, and investors have become quite sophisticated, including the caliber of hedge fund clients investing in such debt. The recession of the last several years has produced a marked rise in the distressed-debt marketplace.

Jonas was the lead attorney representing Icahn and affiliates in the 2010 Trump Entertainment Resorts bankruptcy cases, which included a 15-day courtroom battle and trial involving competing plans of reorganization and a cram-down of \$500 million of secured debt.

“It’s just been a great place for me. The thing that keeps me here are the people. I know that might sound trite and everybody says that,” Jonas said, but for him it’s true.

His mentor is Brown Rudnick CEO Joseph Ryan, who Jonas said taught him how to be a lawyer.

“Jeff is really a lawyer’s lawyer,” Ryan said. “He’s got great legal acumen and great judgment, which is obviously key to client relationship building. But he also has that personal quality that many great lawyers have, which is a worrier. He worries about the details. That really is often what distinguishes the great from the good lawyers.”