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Lawyer works behind the scenes at event

By Amanda Robert
Law Bulletin staff writer

Some attorneys like Timothy L. Epstein step outside their private practice to serve as general counsel to companies and organizations around Chicago.

Several years ago, Epstein, a partner at SmithAmundsen LLC, started as general counsel for At Pluto Ltd., the producer of the Pitchfork Music Festival. The annual three-day festival — slated for this weekend in Union Park — features more than 40 independent bands and artists on three stages.

In the months leading up to Pitchfork, Epstein works behind the scenes, reviewing and negotiating contracts with the city of Chicago, the Chicago Park District and sponsors like Whole Foods Market and Heineken.

“When you’re talking about putting on an event, it’s not just various performers that will be at the event,” he said. “But you’re looking at an event in its total parts.”

He provides risk management, putting plans in place to handle potential injuries or other circumstances that might impact the festival. He said he also ensures that Union Park is restored to order after the crowds head home.

Epstein, who pursued a career in law to practice in the courtroom, said serving as general counsel for At Pluto Ltd., has been an “eye-opening experience.”

“Nothing that I’ve done thus far for this client has required me to get involved in any litigation,” he said. “It’s not only been helpful to me as a lawyer to recognize the value of having a counselor as opposed to an advocate, but I’ve also been able to sharpen and hone my own skills as a counselor.”

Mike Reed, president of At Pluto Ltd., said he has known Epstein most of his life and that usually he avoids going into business with anyone he considers family. But, he said, Epstein’s ability to inspect every angle of his needs are beyond the capability of most attorneys.

“We usually think of law as a way to uphold, enforce and create contracts, agreements and ultimately law,” Reed said. “The part that Tim also makes sure is part of the recipe is client planning and building opportunities.”

“The main aspect that comes into play in this is that he listens to the wishes of the client,” he said.

Epstein grew up in Old Town/Lincoln Park and



Timothy L. Epstein
Outside General Counsel
At Pluto Ltd.

Age: 32

Law school: University of Illinois College of Law, 2004

Law firm: Partner, SmithAmundsen LLC, and chair of the firm’s sports law practice group

Organizations: Co-founder, Loyola Academy Bar Association; chair, Defense Research Institute Sports Law Special Litigation Group; member, DRI Commercial Litigation Steering Committee; and member, Sports Lawyers Association

Activities: Competitive volleyball

later moved to Evanston. He played football, basketball and volleyball as a kid and went on to play volleyball for Boston College.

He said those competitive experiences inspired him to become a trial lawyer.

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"It seemed to be the closest thing to competitive sports that I could find in a career outside of actually playing sports for a living," he said.

Epstein graduated from Boston College in 1999 and University of Illinois College of Law in 2004.

While in law school, he worked as a summer associate at Donohue, Brown, Mathewson & Smyth LLC and Corboy & Demetrio P.C.

Epstein joined SmithAmundsen in August 2004. He started in construction, commercial and large loss claims and later developed the firm's sports law practice group.

He also teaches courses in sports and entertainment law at Loyola University Chicago School of Law and volunteers with Bunkers in Baghdad, a nonprofit organization that collects and sends golf balls and clubs to troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Karen Conti, managing partner of Adamski & Conti LLC, met Epstein when

he took one of her classes in law school. Since then, he's appeared as a guest on "Legally Speaking," her weekly talk show on WGN. At her recommendation, he also stepped in to provide sports law commentary for Chicago's local Fox affiliate.

Conti called Epstein a fine attorney and a good teacher, and she said he can explain things in a very simple manner.

"He's very poised, he's very articulate, and he always gets right to the point," she said.

When asked why he enjoys working for Pitchfork, Epstein said: "I love music, so it's certainly gratifying to see that something that I have played a small part in has come together into successful performances."

He recalled one memorable performance by Public Enemy in 2008. He said all of the hip-hop group's original members, with the exception of one, reunited at Pitchfork to play their seminal 1998 album, "It Takes a Nation of Millions To Hold Us Back."

Epstein, who listens to indie rock, classic

rock and hip-hop, said this year, he's looking forward to seeing indie band LCD Soundsystem. He said exciting hip-hop acts include Raekwon from Wu-Tang Clan and Big Boi from Outkast.

In addition to the music line-up, the festival offers food and art vendors. It also features a first-time comedy stage with "The Daily Show" correspondent Wyatt Cenac and "Saturday Night Live" writer Hannibal Buress.

"I think it's great that we're able to put on a festival in the city that provides such a wide variety of music and food and art to a worldwide audience," Epstein said. "I'm not only happy with the work that I do for this client, but I'm proud of the work that gets put out. I don't know that a lot of lawyers can say that."

As part of his role as general counsel at At Pluto Ltd., Epstein also helps organize "Downtown Sound" at Millennium Park. These free Monday night concerts run through the summer.