

REAL ESTATE

EXECUTIVE

Chicagoland Edition

A BUSINESS AND LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE



Robert Lattas
— **Attorney**

Much More Than a
Real Estate Attorney

Robert Lattas — Attorney

Much More Than a Real Estate Attorney

By Sheila Inbinder

“Do whatever you choose to do in your life, but do it with passion,” was the advice Danny Lattas gave his children. Robert took his father’s advice and has applied his passion to the practice of law.

Unfortunately, in today’s world, it is such a temptation to start with the lawyer jokes. I resisted. As for Bob? He claims he doesn’t tend to get those “jokes” when he’s introduced as an attorney. “Oh, I get one here and there, but the people I deal with day to day are sophisticated investors. They come to me because they know I do my job and they know I work hard. At times, I even crack the lawyer jokes.”

Robert Lattas is a very young man who began his legal career at age 23. His specialty and area of expertise is real estate law, and he is unusually empathetic for someone his age. His office is an unpretentious one in Bucktown, and you almost get the feeling you’re walking right into a movie where the young lawyer hero fights for the underdog. So it didn’t come as a surprise when he told of two stories that really stay in his mind. “Even now, thousands of deals later, they stick with me. One was about a buyer I represented who was an immigrant in this country. He saved \$75,000 in the 30 years he was here to put a down payment on a condo. The same Realtor was representing the buyer and seller, and they really tried to take advantage of him at the closing table.” You could see the anger rising as he relived the story. “Three times, I almost got up and walked out of the closing because I felt the other parties were trying to take advantage of him. He wasn’t allowed to walk through the property before the closing; it was not disclosed to him there was somebody living in the property. There were issues of fraud; issues of misrepresentation.” Even though Bob confesses his anger at the time, he also said, “You try not to show emotions in a real estate deal, but I think one reason that deal was so close to my heart was because my parents were immigrants to this country, and when my dad got his first loan on his home, his interest rate was 11% when the going rate was 7%. Somebody took advantage of him.” Bob saw that happen and made sure it didn’t happen to his client. “We closed the deal

and we got what we wanted.” The next day, the man brought Bob a cake, as the client was a baker for a large company here in Chicago. I think that’s what he remembered most of all. “What I did for that client really made me feel good. I don’t care if he gave me 500 bucks to close a real estate deal; it felt like it had a couple of zeros at the end of that, and that’s all that mattered.”

The other deal concerned a client who was buying property on the South Side of Chicago. “This poor lady was 65 years old and didn’t have much money to put down on a house. But through the loan programs that were available at that time, she was able to buy a house. She was in and out of housing projects all her life, finally had a nice job and was able to buy a house. And once again, people were trying to overcharge her. We were there for seven hours, until 6:30 on a Friday night, but we finally got the deal closed.” Clearly, Bob was back in time as he remarked, “Handing her the keys as a homeowner and not a renter, the lady started to cry.” In its own way, those tears had the same effect on Bob as adding zeros to a check. “It was on the South Side, not the easiest closing to get to, and I could easily have sent one of my colleagues to do it while I made more efficient use of my time, but I refused to because I knew that deal was going to be difficult.” It is not just the challenge Bob

Bob Lattas with his staff outside his 2220 West North Avenue office. Behind him are George Lattas, Adam Dauksas, Steve Felton and Aaron Minkus.





Warren Barr, managing partner of Renaissance Development Group; Bob Lattas; Mary Morrison and Nancy DiVito, Building Managers of Vision on State from Draper & Kramer; and Bob Voss, Construction Manager of Vision on State of Leopardo Companies.

relishes, but the satisfaction he derives from it.

Born and raised in Palos Hills, IL, Bob was reared in the restaurant business where his parents, Danny and Nikoletta, worked 16-17 hours a day. “Growing up, I worked in the restaurant a lot, but my parents didn’t want me to be in the business because it was not a lifestyle they wanted me to endure.” But that work ethic was already instilled in him, and he was destined to work hard no matter what field he chose. “The biggest asset in my career has been seeing how hard my parents worked and knowing what you need to succeed. If you don’t dedicate yourself to what you’re doing, and if you don’t desire to succeed, you’re not going to succeed. If my parents didn’t work as hard they did, I would not be here today.”

His parents discouraging him from being in the restaurant business really had nothing to do with his ultimate choice. “I always wanted to be a lawyer, even in grammar school and high school. I just like the ability to be able to represent somebody; to be an advocate for somebody.” Bob’s first choice was to be a litigator, but he changed his mind after graduating from law school, noting most litigators he spoke to didn’t like that job much. Putting up with all the red tape and procedures of litigation just wasn’t for him.

So, at what point did he decide to go into real estate? “I bought my own building in 2002. I liked working with the seller’s attorney and decided I would like to try and do this myself.” He passed the word around to family and friends that he was now in real estate and got his first clients. Inevitably, as his reputation grew, he became busier and busier. “I worked with a couple of

The biggest asset to my client: I know how to get things done.

— Bob Lattas

Failure is not an option.

— Bob Lattas

@properties agents when @properties was only four or five agents.” Bob attributes a great deal of his success of his growing practice to some @properties agents who were building their business as well. “We had a couple of real tough deals that we were able to persevere and get them done.” And that’s how it all started: “being at my own real estate closing. It was a lot of fun and now, six years later, it still is.” Bob also works with many other real estate brokerage firms today, and is an approved attorney in just about every brokerage firm in Chicago.

The referral base of Bob’s practice is mostly from Realtors. “A Realtor usually wants to work with an attorney whom

they’ve worked with in the past to help solidify a deal,” Bob noted. “Sometimes, Realtors will use attorneys who were the family’s attorneys for 35 or 40 years, but don’t do much real estate work. The result is it makes the transaction difficult. I tell this to people all the time; if you have a heart problem, you go to a heart doctor; you don’t go to a brain surgeon. It’s the same thing with an attorney. If you have a real estate issue, you go to a real estate attorney, not a divorce lawyer.” There is also another advantage, according to Bob. “There are a handful of real estate attorneys and we see each other all the time here in the city. So when you work with an attorney you’ve worked with in the past, it helps to facilitate a smoother real estate transaction.” This is a point he feels strongly about. In dealing with an attorney who doesn’t normally do real estate, he emphasized, “This is a real estate transaction. It is supposed to be an amicable transaction; we’re not fighting a divorce case.” Bob claimed he’s had attorneys call and disagree with him and want to justify themselves at the closing table, but as he said, “I think it is the biggest asset to my client; I know how to get things done.”

This is something Michele Shear, a client and Realtor at @properties, confirmed. “Sometimes at closings, there can be various little problems, but even most important, and he’s the only attorney I’ve ever seen do it, he will catch monetary errors in the favor of my client, and nobody has ever done that. I think he’s just way above and beyond any other attorney I’ve ever seen, and I think that’s why he does catch other peoples’ errors. He’s just very, very sharp.” Michele especially likes the way he puts first-time buyers at ease. “I’ve also had clients who have had problems after closing, even months later, and Bob is right there, just as he said he would be. He makes them his first priority, while other

attorneys will take care of their current clients first. He's a very unique find."

It's not really surprising that Bob is able to put out so many fires. "There aren't many situations at a real estate closing that I haven't seen before. So when I have those kinds of situations, the key is to be able to diffuse it. I know how to be able to facilitate a real estate transaction. The only thing you have to remember," he stresses, "the job of an attorney is to zealously advocate the rights of their client. It's a real estate deal. We're not here to make our egos stronger; I'm here to make sure my clients get what they want."

Bob and Kyle Zake first met at the closing of the purchase of Zake's home. "He was speaking so quickly, I couldn't keep up with him, but he sounded like a pretty smart guy. He ended up doing some work for me and we became friends. Now he does all my real estate work and I recommend him to friends." What caught Zake's attention, besides the speed in which he said Bob spoke, was his knowledge base. "Talking with him, he'll tell me about the closing and doesn't let little details slip. Unfortunately, I think a lot of people will make it easier on themselves. He reads things. He makes sure his clients are getting the best deal. I think he really enjoys that."

I've had clients who have had problems after closing, even months later, and Bob is right there, just as he said he would be. He makes them his first priority.

— Michele Shear, client

Bob Lattas became a lawyer at age 23 and did his first real estate deal at 24. He said that 98% of the time at real estate transactions, he's usually the younger one. He denies that his young age was ever a problem, simply because he's worked with the predominant majority of the attorneys in real estate transactions. "And this is huge. If I need a favor from an attorney, say with their client being very difficult, I can call them up, even at home, and tell them I need their help. Because we know each other on a personal level rather than writing letters back and forth and taking weeks to figure out a problem, I can call them up, bypass all the administrative stuff and say, this is what we need, can you please talk to your client?" Bob recognizes that to make money in real estate law, you have to do volume. "It isn't like having one case where you bill out your client for \$300,000. So my age has never been a factor in making sure my client gets what they want. My colleagues,

Bob, with employees and management of Chicago Title and Trust Company





Bob, with some of the first Realtors (and clients) of @properties — Colin Hebson, Rich DiVito and Joe Zimmerman

who are real estate attorneys, we get along.” And lest you think he’s too easy going, he adds, “Don’t get me wrong. I can be a bear when I need to be a bear. But for the most part, it’s not supposed to be like that; it’s supposed to be an amicable transaction.” The sometime-bear also conceded, “I can be persuasive if I have to be. That’s something every attorney has to have, the ability to be persuasive. You just have to know when to downplay a situation and when to up-play a situation.”

Bob’s wife, Angelica, works for American Invsco, and they met at a closing at Chicago Title. “She was the contract administrator of a building where several of my clients were purchasing units.” Bob didn’t quite understand some things in the contracts, as they were a deviation from the norm, and was trying to get some clarity but wasn’t getting any answers. So he took it out on the person on the other end of the phone, who happened to be ... and then they met at the closing. “Of course she hated me at first,” but obviously he won her over (“I can be very persuasive if I have to be”), and after going together 2½ years, were married in May. They live in the Ukrainian Village area, right down the street from his office. His family still lives in Palos Hills and his parents own Novi’s Beef and Catering in Berwyn. Bob loves to travel and the couple has visited India, Brussels and Argentina recently. His problem remains time. “It’s hard to get away for longer than a weekend because we miss work. People call me because they need something, and there’s just so long that I can

Talking with him, he’ll tell me about the closing and doesn’t let little details slip. He makes sure his clients get the best deal.

— Kyle Zake, buyer/client

hold them off. I have a staff, of course, but people call because they want to speak to me.” That staff consists of law students Adam Dauksas and Aaron Minkus, who work part-time, and Steve Felton, a full-time attorney and assistant. “My brother George, who is in law school, helps me out also.” Let me add at this juncture how helpful that staff has been.

A large portion of Bob’s deals come through representing developers. “The big development that I’m closing out currently is 1255 S. State Street in Chicago, called Vision on State. It’s an @properties development and in this case, you’re doing, in essence, the same thing 253 times for 253 units.” Bob likes representing developers — he referred to it as “fun.” He claimed while they’re alike, there still remains a bit of a difference. “For instance, in one deal

last week, all of a sudden, there was a deal concerning roof rights that I didn’t even know about. So now, I had to go out and amend the declaration to give the person on the third floor the right to the roof. There is *always* something in a deal that is different. That’s what makes it fun. It’s seeing my parties negotiate and seeing that my parties get what they are supposed to give to us.”

Warren Barr, managing partner of Renaissance Development Group, the developer of Vision on State, referred to Bob as a very efficient, personable attorney who does what he says he can do. “From a developer’s standpoint, all that’s good. He does great work and makes our jobs a lot easier by resolving a lot of the issues that come into play. He makes sure all the issues are properly addressed in the contracts and that everything is in order at the closing.”

Bob is obviously smart. He has a bachelor’s degree, a master’s degree and a law degree. But he still claims most of his success comes with experience. “My strong point is finesse around the closing table because the ability to know what needs to be done before the real estate transaction can only be brought on by experience. It is the ability to know what needs to be done and get it done legally and correctly. That takes experience. They don’t teach you this in law school. What they teach you in law school is what the law is, and even then, they don’t teach you how it works in the city. To close a transaction, you have to know it from experience and have the contacts to get something done.” If experience is important, trust is vital.

Bob’s clients have complete trust in him. That’s a given. But he also takes pride in the trust he’s built with his colleagues — colleagues such as title companies, real estate brokers and lenders. As one example, he sited, “I might be at a closing and the lender’s wire was \$2,000 short. But I know the lender well. I go to the title company and tell them I will guarantee the lender will send



Bob, with clients Joe DiCosola and Anthony Abri of Park Construction Group

that wire. I'm not going to sign a personal undertaking unless I know the lender. If I know I can trust that relationship, guys I've worked with and done thousands of deals, I know if they say they're going to send a wire, they're going to send a wire. They'll close the deal and the wire will get sent in a couple of hours." That kind of trust not only makes for an easier working relationship, it's a huge time saver for everybody involved. "If I couldn't do that, we'd be sitting around for about five hours just waiting for that wire to hit. Clients would get frustrated. Tempers would flare. Many times, my clients do not know about these fires — I try and put them out without them even knowing a fire existed. It is part of my job and it is only after having closed so many deals that people trust I can put out these fires."

Another point Bob made about trust: "In representing developers, quite often, liens will show up on properties, or there's a title issue or a document that's missing. If I tell the title company that I'm going to get it, they know I'm going to get it. It's as simple as that. It allows for a more efficient real estate transaction." Even with all the talk about efficiency, Bob suddenly added, "Closing a real estate deal can be a nightmare sometimes." Still, it's his mission to make sure it doesn't come to that.

Bob is the type of individual who can't work for somebody else. He tried. He hated it. "I resented authority. I have to live up to my potential. When I'm not challenged, I just don't perform well. Every real estate deal is a different kind of challenge, and the challenge is making sure your client gets what he wants and staying on top of those files." While he says the company he worked for was

He does great work and makes our jobs a lot easier by resolving a lot of the issues that come into play.

— Warren Barr, Renaissance Development Group

great and he loved Miami and was making good money, "It sucked." Coming back to Chicago, Jason Vondrachek was his first real estate agent. The two roomed on the same floor their freshman year at DePaul, and have remained friends as well as colleagues ever since. "Being self-employed is a double-edged sword. It's nice because you get to make your own hours and work whenever you want." (That translates to 80- to 90-hour workweeks). "I work consistently. I work out of my house. I work here. I work typically one day over the weekend (and my wife gets mad at me when I do), but the long and short of it is, I make deals happen! People entrust me with their biggest financial decisions, buying or selling a piece of property. And *I will not fail!* It's just not going to happen

on my watch. That to me is the biggest motivator of all; that I stay on top of it. I am not going to have somebody disappointed in me or any of my staff. My staff and I will stay up at night or start at 5 a.m. to make sure it all happens." It sounds grueling, but as Bob readily admitted, "You work all hours, but the difference is I enjoy it. I have a true passion for the work that I do. And when you have that passion, I can work 15 hour days and it doesn't bother me."

Jason Vondrachek, owner of Quest Realty Group, is the real estate counterpart of Bob. They have remained colleagues, friends and investment partners throughout the years, even sharing office space at one time. Jason said he encouraged Bob to go into his own practice and is really a unique attorney. "He works nights and weekends and does what he has to do to make sure that his work is done. All of us have worked with other attorneys and know how unique this is. He's just an incredible guy with more energy than anyone I've ever met." Jason also related a few personal anecdotes: The time they were traveling and got bumped off a flight to Greece when they were going on a trip, and because of that, they got to see Michael Jordan, who had just played in the Bull/Jazz sixth game of the finals; of being in Germany and watching the U.S. play Germany for the World Cup. The two are even talking about joining forces for an Antarctica trip. Professionally, "There are things that he gets done that other people wouldn't have the energy or the expertise to do."

That office with Jason wasn't Bob's first office. When he returned to Chicago from Florida, he bought a building on Newport Avenue and had, what he terms, a little home office out of there. "At the time, I had to have high-speed Internet line in my home; I got one of those fax machine/copy machine/scanners and I paid 15 bucks a month to put up a website and have my own e-mail address. And boom! I had an office." Working out of home turned out to be one of those good news/bad news situations.

“If I had something to do, I’d just go downstairs and do it. You can’t distance yourself from your professional and personal lives.” Predictably, he got so busy, working out of the home was no longer an option, and since Jason was in the same position, they opened their offices together. “I had the back area and he had the front area, and it was nice.” Finally, with one stop in between, he moved to his current office. “And I’m in this office space long term.”

Bob’s office is on the ground floor of a building in a bustling commercial section of the Bucktown. The first things you notice when you enter are the pictures on the wall; pictures of Bob with Mayor Daley, pictures with Hillary Clinton, pictures with Bill Clinton and pictures with George Bush. There are others, equally impressive, but that’s just a sampling, and a sampling to be explained.

Bob, having finished his undergraduate degree in accounting from DePaul University in just over three years, had about seven months to do nothing before starting law school. He ran into a friend of his whom he hadn’t seen since high school who used to work at the Pentagon. “I said it would be kind of cool to work at the White House.” Bob, being Bob, called the White House, was connected to the interns department (which he didn’t even know existed), and asked for and received an application. As he said, “I fired it off,” and two weeks later got a letter saying, “Congratulations, you’ve been accepted to work at the White House.” Bob had to pass a “grueling” FBI background check and then moved to Washington, DC, and worked at the White House under Bill Clinton. “I worked in the scheduling office. Working there was my sole purpose; I was there to work at the White House, whereas a lot of my intern colleagues were there to go to school part time. The beauty about that is that I had some good exposure to the senior-level staff of the president because I was always there and I had top-secret clearance.” He related this rather nonchalantly, but you could tell he was having the time of his life. “Working at the White House was crazy hours and then,

David Hochberg, Bob Lattas, Chris Soto and Ron Abrams in studio, on their weekly radio program on AM 560.



He works nights and weekends and does what he has to do to make sure that his work is done. All of us have worked with other attorneys and know how unique this is.

— Jason Vondrachek, Quest Realty Group

when the scandal hit [as in Lewinsky], it was an unbelievable time to be in DC. I was 21 years old and I was working at the White House! Working for the president was an unbelievable thing ... late night hours, seeing the president in the Oval Office ... my job was really to do nothing more than to distribute his schedule to the senior-level staff twice a day. Obviously, I wasn’t there to make policy or tell him what to do. But handing Betty Curry, his personal assistant and fellow Illinoisan, his schedule at 8:30 at night when they’re in a big policy meeting, was fun, and I had full access and clearance from being there full time. It was great. It was an experience I’ll never forget.”

While Bob was still working in Florida and hating it, he had a brainstorm. He started wondering what universities were around, because with all his degrees, he was eligible to teach at a university. He Googled a radius of about 50 miles around where he was living, and e-mailed out his resume. Within hours, he received a reply from Nova Southeastern University, where he taught part-time up until last year. And get this. On the weekends, he was flown to The Bahamas and to Jamaica to teach because the university had a satellite campus both places. When he came back to Chicago, the dean in charge of the department told him she’d fly him back and forth if he would continue teaching on the weekends. “I was gone 20 to 25 weekends a year teaching, but that was kind of a buffer for me during the beginning of my practice days because I had that income coming in. It acted as a stress relief because when my practice first started, I wasn’t closing hundreds of deals; I had a handful.” Teaching also proved to be therapeutic for Bob. He loved being in front of the classroom. He felt he brought an energy level to unmotivated high school graduates, and even now, six or seven years later, he still hears from many of those students. Still, the time came when he had to make a decision. His practice was now thriving, he was in a serious relationship and he was gone at least 20 weekends. As much as he loved teaching, it was a no-brainer. “I stopped teaching altogether and focused my career into representing real estate. I had spent seven years building my practice and I wasn’t about to sacrifice it.”

Bob received his master’s and law degrees from Indiana University in Bloomington, IN. “Law school was a great experience and I truly enjoyed it. I enjoyed talking to the professors and asking them questions. I enjoyed listening to them and being in class with them.” He was in his office on a holiday because he was sending out letters to classmates, asking for donations to the law school. “That’s my project for today.” He judges moot court

competitions for students aspiring to be attorneys who need to practice in front of a moot court, and he lectures twice a year at the Entrepreneur Legal Clinic at Indiana University. “I still have a very close relationship with my law school because they helped me a lot.” Although he’s not teaching, he still talks to students a lot. “I talk about what it takes to be an entrepreneur. The problem with law school is they gear you to a certain path. You graduate and are supposed to go on to be a successful lawyer. It doesn’t work that way. There’s no path to making money. There’s no path to being successful. To be successful, you have to work hard and dedicate yourself. Period. You also need to be personable. People have to want to call you. People have to trust you.” People trust Bob in more ways than one. He finds himself acting more and more as a counselor these days. “People come to me many times seeking advice on things totally unrelated to our professional association in the past.”

We had spoken on the phone several times, but when we first met, I saw a casual young man, dressed in sweats, seated behind a desk that had a candle burning on it. The casual apparel was because it was not a regular workday, and the candle was a relaxation technique he’s used since school. Official workday or not, he is always the consummate professional.

Since I made a point of Bob’s casual attire the day we met, it seems appropriate to mention a totally unsolicited remark from Matt Eggers, another developer client of Bob’s. It was sheer coincidence when he remarked, “He’s a very snappy dresser, by the way.” And rather than going into the details of Bob’s wardrobe, I’d rather pass on some of his remarks as a client. “Bob has always worked on the legal end of all our deals. He’s very energetic and very excited about what he does. It’s just such a nice departure to work with someone who is so into what they do as opposed to going through the monotony of just working a job, especially in an industry that’s pretty black and white. Even though closings can be almost the same in a development, he continues to explain what is going on. You’re inundated with tons of paperwork for your signature, and he never seems to get bored telling you exactly what it is you are doing. It’s more than just signing papers. I like that. He never just goes through the motions, as so many do.” Oh. One more thing he mentioned. “Bob also has a sense of humor, which in the industry, seems to be lacking a little bit.” Bob’s dedication to his clients remains steadfast, as when Matt’s partners were having an issue with a development and Bob went up to Lake Forest and met with the clients at 8 p.m. He takes 24/7 quite literally.

In closing, a few random thoughts about and from Bob: As an undergraduate, he gave the commencement speech at DePaul. He totally believes in being nice to people. He really believes in networking and makes it clear how much he appreciates the assistants



Bob and Angelica Lattas, on their honeymoon in Bora Bora.

in all the offices he has contact with, and shows it. He’s a man who unabashedly declares, “I’m always thinking; always one step ahead.” And most of all, “Failure is not an option!”

He plays the “occasional” sports: basketball, tennis, football. “I’ve run two of the Chicago marathons,” but reflects he now has to get back in shape. He loves traveling more than anything else and is trying to convince his wife to go to Shanghai, Moscow and Vietnam next year. “We’re both very close to our families, so we do spend time with them, and we’re still trying to finish furnishing our house.”

There is one more person I think should be heard from to sort of round out the article.

In a way, it sums up the story of Bob’s remarkable success. Nick Wilkins is also a client of Bob’s. He says Bob is one of the best and probably one of the most successful 30-year-olds he’s met. “He knows his stuff inside and out. He’s an analytic type that has great social skills, and that’s a rare combination. People gravitate towards him. At closings, he makes it easy; he makes you feel extremely comfortable and explains everything to you. He simplifies things and lets you know what you want to pay attention to. He’s great. I think he’s one of the top real estate attorneys in Chicago.”

While Bob is busy, he always has time to meet new Realtors and clients and is happy to take another real estate deal. “This is why I have a staff — to help me,” he added. Maybe we should end with Bob’s declaration. It’s almost like an oath. “The promise I make to every Realtor and every client: You call me, and you’ll get a call back the same day if I am unavailable at the time you call me. Send me an e-mail, I’ll return it the same day. This is important to me. People call me because they have an issue and they have a question. They need my help. I’m here to help them.”

And help them he always does. ■

I think he’s one of the top real estate attorneys in Chicago.

— Nick Wilkins, client

*For more information, please call (312) 850-2622
or visit www.lattaslaw.com*