

Cooper Cargill Chant is a law firm with a heart - and proud of it

By Rachael Brown

Contributing Writer

NORTH CONWAY — The biggest law firm in the North Country has a big heart, too.

The acquisition in April 2008 of the Berlin law firm, Bergeron, Hanson and Bornstein, by North Conway's Cooper Cargill Chant cements the company as northern New Hampshire's largest law firm practicing in: personal injury; real estate; business and corporate; planning, zoning and municipal; civil litigation; family law; bankruptcy, employment and labor law; criminal defense and DWI.

When Berlin partner Peter Bornstein was appointed associate justice of the New Hampshire Superior Court and left his firm he wanted to be certain that a strong law firm would prevail in Berlin. Partner Paul Chant, of Cooper Cargill Chant, says when they took over the practice they were able to add areas of service to become a full service firm and to continue to serve the people of Berlin.

The firm also serves the people of the Mount Washington Valley and western Maine. The broad base of services is supported by the versatile staff of Cooper Cargill Chant.

"Each partner brings to the table their own area of concentration, which is a luxury in this state," says Chant. He adds that if one needs real estate help, there is Randy Cooper; if it is a domestic situation there is Charles Greenhalgh, and for criminal expertise there is Dennis Morgan. "There is a lot to law these days," he adds.

And the practice of law has seen its ups and downs just like other businesses during these challenging economic times. The residential real estate has probably been the toughest.

"We have to diversify or disappear, we have to be flexible and reallocate our resources," says Morgan, managing partner. He explains that in the first quarter of 2009 he met with more bankruptcy clients than in the entire year of 2008. Chant says that at the national level huge firms have been devastated.

"You have to be able to maintain profitability. Up here it is a balancing act, you



Dennis Morgan (left), managing partner, and Paul Chant, partner, at Cooper Cargill Chant take pride in their work and giving back to the community. (Rachael Brown Photo)

work hard and play hard," he says. Chant says he knows of some attorneys who have held outside jobs to pay the bills. He is happy to say, though, this is not the case at Cooper Cargill Chant.

Changes and trends

Morgan and Chant, who have been with Cooper Cargill Chant since 2001 and 1999 respectively, have seen changes and trends in the legal profession.

One change in the profession is the practice of Alternative Dispute Resolution. This is an alternative to going to court to settle disputes. "With the right attorney, mediation can be successful rather than ultimately going to court," says Morgan.

Chant is a Superior Court Certified Mediator. He says serving as an arbitrator is very satisfying work.

"You can start out the day working with two parties or more and it seems like a hopeless situation; with prodding and nudging you work toward a resolution. There comes a moment as a mediator when you know the case will be resolved. The parties don't see this yet. It is extraordinarily fulfilling to know they will leave with a resolution," he says. Chant adds that mediation is the biggest change he

has seen in his 23 years of law practice. ADR was in its infancy when he was in law school.

Another change is client awareness. "People are more educated now, they ask better questions," says Morgan. He also says there is not the same deference to lawyers as in years gone by because of more public awareness and of course, the Internet. "Clients view lawyers to be utilized to improve their [client's] position," he adds. "We have to be more flexible as lawyers."

Morgan would like to dispel the image that lawyers are not approachable and adds, "People think we are not approachable. One of our strengths is we can sit down with folks, we have a commonality, we sit on school boards. We are all parents in this community."

Legal experts, one & all

Speaking of public images, the firm works to change another perception. "I think there is a perception in the valley that you need to go out of the valley to get an expert. I hope we are changing that perception," says Chant.

He talks about a case the firm handled up in Berlin. One week before an alternative school was about to open, the school's

principal and lead teacher were sued by their former employer. The former employer obtained a temporary restraining order. Within 48 hours, Chant and associate Christopher Meier were able to get the restraining order lifted. The school did open. The case was decided in favor of the new school in that it met the best interests of the students and parents. Chant and Meier went up against a prestigious International Place Boston law firm.

"We gained support of the educational officials of Groveton and Berlin, we prevailed. The International Place law firm received notice that it was in the best interest of the kids to open the school," says Chant.

And here's more on having a big heart. In addition to working on cases like the one in Berlin, the firm and its attorneys take great pride in working within the local community — it's almost like part of the job description.

"We literally represent a couple of hundred small businesses in the community. We work with 94 non-profits and every lawyer is active in one or more organizations in the Valley," says Chant.

The list is too long to mention all, but here are a few examples:

Ken Cargill does most of the corporate work. Randy Cooper is immediate past president of the Mount Washington Observatory. Chant sits on the boards of the Mount Washington Valley Economic Council, the Ham Arena, the Mount Washington Valley School to Career Partnership, the Kennett High School Student Improvement Task Force. Morgan serves on the board of directors for the Eastern Slope Ski Foundation and just finished working with the Eastern Slope Ski Sale. Charles Greenhalgh served on the White Mountain Waldorf School board of trustees and the Tamworth Conservation Commission.

"This [giving] is part of our culture, says Chant. "What this firm brings to non-profits in the Valley is perhaps unmatched by any other business. They [non-profits] turn to us; it's flattering," he says. ▲