

Adventures in Making a Difference

Adventure in a kids' world is a simple thing – exploring a park, finding a snail, riding a bike for the first time. The list is endless as so much is new.

Adventure in the adult world is tougher to define and even more difficult to create, especially with the weight of professional and other responsibilities on our shoulders. And yet it's the word that kept popping up when talking to Peter Biro, the profile subject of this issue.

To Peter, adventure incorporates three elements: it must involve novelty or new terrain, it must involve a genuine challenge, and it must be personally meaningful. Over the course of his 20-year legal career, Peter has managed to live by this creed, not only through his professional work but through the extensive community work to which he is just as dedicated.

And the adventure continues. In April 2011, Peter left WeirFoulds and his legal career to assume the role of President and CEO of Newcon Optik, a manufacturer of state-of-the-art electro optics (night vision, thermal imaging and laser rangefinding devices). We thank Peter for sharing his story with us and we wish him continued success in his new role.

Our Interview

Where are you from originally?

I was born and raised in Toronto, but my parents were born in Europe. My mother fled the continent with her parents in 1938 but my father was unfortunately a guest of the Nazis in various labour and concentration camps during the war. My

parents' experience as holocaust survivors obviously marked me and had a significant influence on my values, attitudes and on some of my life decisions.

Was law always a calling?

Not at the beginning. I was interested in politics and political theory in particular – so I did an undergraduate degree at Guelph and then did an M.A. in political theory at McMaster. I enjoyed spending time in student government as well. I continued on at the University of Toronto doing doctoral work and teaching there, but halfway through the program, I suffered what I have called a crisis of utility and decided that I could be most effective as a lawyer; so I went to law school at McGill.

Why the switch?

As much as I wanted to teach and write, I also wanted to be a person of action – to contribute to the improvement of our condition and to have some sort of direct and salutary impact. The law reaches into every corner of our civilization and way of life – and for me, the “advocacy” aspect of the profession seemed to offer a means by which I might channel my neuroses and aggression and my other pathologies to some socially constructive ends!

How did you end up at WeirFoulds?

It was a long and winding road. I summered at Stikeman Elliott in Montreal, articulated and continued my career at Goodman and Carr as an associate and then as a partner until the firm met its untimely end in 2007. I considered the option of joining or creating a boutique litigation firm, but I really wanted a firm that could most adequately serve the broader interests and needs of my clients (then

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ALUMNUS PROFILE

Peter Biro



Peter Biro (above) was photographed in his Toronto office at Newcon Optik.

existing and prospective). This required a full-service firm. WeirFoulds was a great fit that way. Many of my clients were medium-sized entrepreneurial companies and WeirFoulds was a firm that I felt could both support the way I did business and the very broad needs of my clients.

Has litigation always been your focus?

There was never a doubt that litigation was the only choice for me. My career choice was determined by my abiding desire to be always furthering some cause or interest – to be the voice of people in need. It’s extremely gratifying and I’ve never lost the reverence for the role I was privileged to play, knowing that I was in a position to help others, to make a difference in their lives and to be an agent of positive change for them.

And, of course, I’ve always appreciated the entrepreneurial sensibility and temperament and the circumstance in which one might have direct responsibility for the course of events. I like decision-makers and risk-takers – the people who take responsibility for their own mistakes. They made up the heart of my client base and I cared a lot about them and their success. I was always tougher on my clients than on the opposing parties. But it was all based on caring and wanting to see them succeed.

Was your role at WeirFoulds similar to your work at Goodman and Carr?

It was because I’ve always felt that the most important role I’ve played for clients was as an external general counsel – always offering them my caring coupled with a full range of solutions.

<p>1988–1989</p>	<p>1991–1992</p>	<p>1993–2007</p>	<p>2007–2011</p>	<p>Present</p>
<p>Summer Student Stikeman Elliott Montreal</p>	<p>Articling Student Goodman and Carr LLP Toronto</p>	<p>Associate Lawyer and Partner Goodman and Carr LLP</p>	<p>Partner WeirFoulds LLP</p>	<p>President and CEO Newcon Optik</p>

I never chose to sell my own services – my clients knew what I could do and, over time, so did my colleagues in the profession. But I did spend a lot of time and effort singing the praises of my partners and associates, because my clients would eventually need help in some way that didn't involve litigation. And, more importantly, the best way to build a firm is by promoting the solutions offered by the firm as a whole and its rich and diverse pool of talent rather than promoting only my own skill set.

What led you to Newcon?

Newcon became a client just a few months before I joined WeirFoulds, so I've known the company for several years. But it was a huge case in the U.S. that really changed the nature of the relationship.

Michael Beker, the founder of Newcon, along with then vice-president Arie Prilik, were facing serious criminal charges in the U.S. concerning a contract to supply night-vision goggles to the U.S. military for use by Iraq's army. They were innocent of the charges and I undertook it as my almost sacred mission to see that they would be fully vindicated. I led and coordinated the legal defence team. But it was not so much the legal victory as the deepening of the personal relationship with Beker that became a turning point in my life.

The case, while exhilarating on so many levels, was also hugely traumatic. For three years, we lived with the fear that there would be a criminal conviction. People who I knew were innocent could go to jail. I travelled all over the world for this file, preparing the case. It took every bit of energy I had – I even suffered a near fatal heart attack mid-way through the month-long trial while in San Francisco. I had to finish the case from my hospital bed, reviewing the work of the U.S. attorneys who were defending my clients in court and sending in my feedback and instructions by courier, BlackBerry and telephone.

In the end, my clients were completely exonerated, with the judge slamming the U.S. government for its actions in laying the charges. It was tremendously gratifying.

How did you end up joining the company?

The last thing I was thinking about after the trial in San Francisco was leaving the practice of law, because I loved it. I was bringing in new clients and new business, more challenging files, and I felt that I was

really just hitting my stride in the practice. I was recovering from the heart attack and was looking forward to another 20 years of law and advocacy.

But a couple of months after the trial, Michael Beker came to me and asked me to join Newcon and run the company. Michael is one of the most brilliant people I've ever met in my life, and his moral character is beyond reproach. He's 10 years older than me and I consider him not just an extraordinary client, but also a mentor, friend and teacher. I told him he was crazy to offer me the job, that I wasn't qualified, and that it was the wrong business for a guy like me who was a critic of the "military industrial complex", had spent a fair bit of his career fighting abuses of authority and was a pacifist, human rights activist and civil libertarian! This is, after all, a business that sells 85% of its products to the military. So I really had to think hard about the opportunity.

But I started to understand what the opportunity was really about. It wasn't about the money or position, and it wasn't about participating in the arms race. It was about the adventure. Just because one has done one thing reasonably well for a period of years doesn't mean one doesn't have other talents and other unrealized potentialities. This was a chance for me to work for and with people in a different capacity. And it was a chance for me to play a different role, one of entrepreneur, decision-maker, stakeholder-strategist, leader and manager.

I think the fact that I loved the law so much allowed me to make the move because I left under very happy circumstances – I wasn't escaping or seeking refuge. So while it is very bittersweet and I miss my colleagues and our staff, I'm looking forward to the challenges ahead.

How do you reconcile your personal skepticism of authority with your role as the president of a company that sells a majority of your products to the military?

That was something I had to think through very carefully. As much as I'm a pacifist by nature, I also believe in the rule of law and the rights of peoples and nations to be secure, autonomous and free and to be able to comply with international law. So if you believe it's important to keep countries and their people safe, then you accept that we need institutions that promote these values, rights and conditions – institutions such as law enforcement, armies, navies, and border

security. As much as my identity as a child of holocaust survivors has given me an allergic reaction to many of these institutions and to people in uniforms with guns and power, there is no denying that we need them. If you believe these institutions are essential to peace, security and the rule of law, then they must be properly provisioned. And that's where Newcon Optik comes in.

In fairness, our work goes well beyond the military as we also have a large commercial and consumer market. Products like range finders, night-vision goggles and thermal imaging scopes have a whole host of other uses in endeavours ranging from search and rescue and surveillance and construction to golfing and hunting and bird watching.

What are some of the challenges you're facing in your new role?

We're a small company – with just 40 employees and another 60 representatives – but we're competing against some of the biggest players on the planet. So we have finite resources and have to get a lot more done with a lot less. That's a big challenge. I want to do 10 times what we have the resources to accomplish. A lot of people in our organization wear several hats and there's lots of multi-tasking going on. It's all part of the adventure. In the end, I'm just hoping that I can make a positive difference here. I am certainly having a lot of fun trying!

What do you make time for outside of your paid and volunteer work?

I have two sons with Laura (my ex-wife and still best friend) – ages 20 and 17 – so my time with them is always most precious and my number one priority. One of the activities we most enjoy doing together is skiing the powder and glades of Western Canada and the United States. And my partner Camelia lives in Nova Scotia, so I try to get out there as much as I can. On my own, I read, write, listen to and compose music, sing and play guitar, play tennis – that's my "downtime".

Peter Biro: Community Matters

Peter's other work – his unpaid community work – has always been an integral part of his life, and of his work day.

"It all blends into my life. I've never separated the two," says Peter. "And I couldn't have taken this job if the company wasn't accepting of my other commitments. It's just too important to me."

While Peter has sat on numerous boards and committees, including having been a Governor of the University of Haifa, two organizations are a particular focus at the moment. First, he's the Treasurer and a Director of Global Secretariat of The Jane Goodall Institute (JGI) and a Director of JGI Canada, an organization that supports wildlife research, education

and conservation and promotes informed and compassionate action to improve the environment shared by all living creatures. Peter considers Goodall, for whom he has become a trusted advisor, both a dear personal friend and one of the most inspiring individuals on the planet.

Peter is also the co-founder of Pollination Project with his life partner, film producer Camelia Frieberg. The Project is based in rural Nova Scotia on a biodynamic farm with 250 acres of woods, fields, lake and river, and offers workshops, seminars and residential fellowships. It's dedicated to nurturing the relationships that exist between ecologically sound land use and food production, physical health and spiritual well-being, creative self-expression and sustainable community.

Peter says the involvement with Goodall, Pollination Project, and his other community projects is "as important as anything else I do". And as much as he claims the drive to do the work is a selfish one – to counteract his own insecurities related to feeling unproductive and ineffective in the world – it's clear that many people, institutions and creatures of the world continue to benefit from his good work.

To contact Peter Biro

Peter welcomes contact with other WeirFoulds alumni. You can reach him at pbiro@newcon-optik.com.

Time to renew friendships and build new ones

The WeirFoulds identity has been and continues to be shaped by the relationships created and developed here. Our alumni are a significant part of that identity and of our future.

Come back in 2012 and reconnect with your friends and colleagues. Planning has started for another Alumni Reunion and we hope that you will join us for an evening of camaraderie and reminiscing. More details will follow in upcoming issues.

Please keep in touch. Let us know if your contact information will be changing in the near future.

Send your updated information to publications@weirfoulds.com or WeirFoulds LLP, 1600-130 King Street West, PO Box 480, Toronto, ON M5X 1J5.