

PITTSBURGH BUSINESS TIMES

Personalities of Pittsburgh: Babst Calland's Donald Bluedorn II

PATTY TASCARELLA
SENIOR REPORTER
PITTSBURGH BUSINESS TIMES

Donald Bluedorn II built most of his career at Babst Calland and, in mid-2017, became just the second managing shareholder in the law firm's 33-year history. In June, he took Babst Calland into Texas via a merger with The Chambers Law Group, based in Houston. Bluedorn, who also practices the martial art of Brazilian jiu-jitsu, is focused on energy and natural resources and environmental work.

You have an engineering degree. Did that figure into your decision to be a lawyer? My father was the first person in our family to go to college – he got an engineering degree, then went to night school and got an MBA and then a law degree. He worked for the local power company and ran a country practice out of our farm. I'd always wanted to be a lawyer. My dad said, "You like science and math, get an engineering degree. If you decide not to go to law school, you can do something with that. With a political science degree, you're committed to going to law school." By the time I got to my senior year in college, I really wanted to go into law. But in some ways, engineering was a fantastic background: It taught economic rigor, discipline and to think problems through in a logical way. No one has ever hired me as a lawyer for my engineering skills, but it helps me to understand the science behind what we're doing and to engage with the engineers or consultants clients might be using. It worked out the way my dad intended.

How does a farm kid from New Castle turned law firm leader wind up practicing jiu-jitsu? I've done martial arts since I was a teenager, picked it up in college. I did a form of Japanese karate for 25 years, and I've been doing jiu-jitsu since 2006, training at a place in the South Hills. It's a great form of exercise and self-defense, almost like meditation. No matter how much I have going on or how fast my brain is working, as soon as I start doing it, it's all I think about. I walk out completely refreshed and feel like a million bucks.

Babst Calland is Pittsburgh's sixth-biggest law firm, but it was a rambunctious spinout in the late 1980s when you joined. What was the attraction? I started with another large firm, Eckert Seamans Cherin & Mellott LLC, and at the time, I was very attracted to sophisticated transactions, and I didn't think the fit was ideal for me. I knew people who'd come to Babst. I interviewed at the end of 1987, I attended the firm's holiday party and started my first work day in January 1988. It was a very small firm. We hadn't done any buildout in the space at Two Gateway – the guy in the office next to me had a door too narrow to fit a desk so he worked off a folding table.



The merger with Chambers was really a big move for Babst Calland. How did it come about?

We looked at it very hard for about 18 months, and from a business perspective, there was a natural fit. We're already doing a significant amount of work in the Marcellus and Utica shale plays, and many clients are also doing work in the Permian. We took a very strategic approach – it was important not to come in as carpetbaggers but to have a group that was well-respected and already doing the work. We didn't want to cobble together people and hope the chemistry was right. We were very fortunate to enter into discussions with Les Chambers and others at his firm. It's already starting to pay off by doing more work for existing clients and getting new ones.

Could you see doing more such deals? It's client-driven. We never thought we'd want to be in X location, have Y number of lawyers or Z number of offices. But we're always evaluating opportunities.

How has your Washington, D.C., office driven the firm's work with autonomous vehicles? When we opened Washington, it was natural. We were doing so much energy work in Marcellus and Utica that pipeline safety was very important to us. Transportation and mobile emerging technologies was a natural add-on. It shares a common regulatory base and that came back and started to grow in Pittsburgh. We have lawyers practicing back and forth between the two offices. We refer to it as emerging technologies, but it's heavily autonomous

vehicles with deal work going on in Pittsburgh.

What's your role in expanding the practices? Shortly after I became managing shareholder, someone asked me, "What's your job?" Well, my job is not to screw it up. The firm is in a good place and everyone is happy. I could hold on to whatever we are today, and in 10 years, I will have failed because the pace will have evolved, people will have expectations. But to forget what we are, what our business model is and our culture is, and fly off the handle to do new things just to do new things, I can't do that either. My job is to stay between those, hopefully down the middle. We want to grow in multiple dimensions as opposed to a lateral bolt-on, and we're looking for natural synergies.

BIOBOX

Title: Managing shareholder, Babst Calland

Age: 58

Education: B.S., electrical engineering, Grove City College; J.D., University of Pittsburgh School of Law

Residence: Blackridge

First job: Working at the Lawrence County fairgrounds

Family: Wife Amy; son Zachary, 28; daughter Mackenzie, 26

Hobbies: Brazilian jiu-jitsu

Causes: Communities in Schools of Pittsburgh and Pittsburgh Legal Diversity and Inclusion Coalition