

Noted Nevada attorney aims to be 'lawyer to the people'

By Brian Cox



After more than 40 years as a personal injury lawyer in Las Vegas, Rick Harris has enough stories to fill a two-volume memoir.

And having built a tremendously successful law firm – not once, but twice – he has enough hard-won insight and acumen to write the quintessential how-to guide.

But he'd rather spend his time tending to the Richard Harris Law Firm, exploring ways to strengthen and enforce its identity as the top personal injury law firm in the state he loves.

Born in Idaho, where his father worked at a nuclear testing facility and was involved in the development of the first nuclear reactor for the USS Nautilus submarine, Harris moved with his family to Newport Beach, California, when he was a teenager. His father, Donald, had decided to change careers and go into retail. After opening a Hallmark store in Newport Beach, Harris's father next looked to open a second store in Las Vegas.

Harris's arrival in Las Vegas is a story he's told so many times over the years that it's nearly mythological. He's even included it in some of the firm's advertising spots.

On the day they moved, the rest of the family was ahead in a moving van while Harris and his father followed in the family's 1963 Mercury Colony Park station wagon. In the sweltering desert heat, the car overheated and blew a head gasket, leaving the father and son stranded on the side of the road.

"What do you do in June of 1968 when your car breaks down?" says Harris. "Well, you stick your thumb out and you hitchhike, which was very common in the '60s. I always tell people I hitched into town."

Harris arrived in Las Vegas on his 15th birthday. He would stay for the next 54 years.

The Hallmark store, which was located in Las Vegas's first indoor mall, was a family-run affair. Everyone pitched in and the hours could be long. Harris remembers spending holidays at the store, helping to change it over for the next holiday on the calendar.

"There's probably nothing more difficult than the restaurant business and the retail business," says Harris. "My dad was the hardest working person I've ever met. He loved work and he outworked everyone."

By the time Harris's father retired, he owned 30 Hallmark stores.

Harris describes his mother, Janeen, as an angel with an enormous heart.

"I thank my mom and dad all the time for the gifts they gave me and the examples they gave me," says Harris. "I credit them for those two talents that I think embody a successful personal injury lawyer: hard work and heart."

Harris considered becoming a lawyer from early on, and his father encouraged it.

"My dad always said, 'You should be a lawyer,' because I like to argue and get my way with any particular issue," says Harris. "So, I set my sights on becoming a lawyer on dad's recommendation."

And when Harris sets his sights on a goal, time has shown that he is apt to let nothing distract or discourage him from achieving it. It is a mindset he first began to develop while embarked on a two-year mission to England that he took as part of his Mormon faith. The experience provided valuable leadership opportunities and he learned to focus on setting and achieving objectives.

"I came off my mission really disciplined, not to be distracted by anything or anybody," he says. "I kept my eye on the ball during college and law school to make sure I got through it without distraction."

At Brigham Young University in Utah, Harris studied communications and majored in broadcast journalism. He worked at several radio stations and for a while had his own rock 'n' roll radio show at night. The exposure and experience would serve him well years later when he turned his attention to marketing his fledgling law firm.

On college break in the summer of 1975, Harris had the opportunity to work as a corporate security guard for Howard Hughes's company, Summa Corp. He tells the story of monitoring alarms systems on the graveyard shift and talking with aides of the eccentric billionaire business magnate, who by then was living at the Xanadu Princess Resort on Grand Bahama Island.

"His aides would travel back and forth from the Bahamas to clip his fingernails, wash his hair," says Harris. "He hadn't been seen in years. They'd share with me how the 'old man' was doing. Tell me how grumpy he was."

After graduating from BYU, Harris took the next step in his life plan and attended University of the Pacific, McGeorge School of Law in Sacramento. A strong academic record in law school led to his selection as a law clerk intern to Chief Justice John Mowbray of the Nevada Supreme Court.

Initially, Harris thought he might combine his interest in broadcasting, love of music and the law to become an agent or entertainment lawyer, but he excelled in his tort classes and realized he had found his calling.

"I understood the ability to get points in a case," he says.

Graduating from McGeorge in 1980, Harris successfully took the California Bar and the Nevada Bar in the same week.

Intending to open his own personal injury practice, Harris

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instead took one of the few detours in his life when an offer from the prominent criminal defense firm Goodman, Oshins, Brown & Singer proved too alluring to pass up.

“When I got the offer from the Goodman firm, I said that is sort of a one-way door,” recalls Harris. “That opportunity is probably never going to happen again.”

Goodman was a renowned criminal defense attorney who often represented defendants thought to be associated with organized crime, such as Meyer Lansky, Tony Spilotro, and Frank “Lefty” Rosenthal. Later, Goodman went on to become a three-term mayor of Las Vegas; his wife, Carolyn, was elected mayor after him and is currently in her third term.

Harris stayed with Goodman for 18 months. It was an exciting time for a fresh-out-of-law-school attorney with big plans and ambitious aims.

“One thing Oscar Goodman told me was: ‘You know what, Rick, my clients hug me through the bars.’ Think of that. He’s lost the case but he gets a final hug. That always registered with me. What clients want is effort. They want to know that you’re committed, you’re passionate, you’re willing to work hard. And they know that not every case is winnable, but what they expect is that you’re going to try your hardest. And that has stayed with me other the years. We really try hard to do our best on every case, win or lose.”

Harris went solo after leaving the Goodman firm, taking any cases that came in the door as he built up his personal injury practice.

“I learned early on to listen and not be so dominant in the relationship with clients that I missed out on the important things the clients were trying to tell me,” he says. “They are looking for you to solve this problem and you’d better exude a certain amount of confidence and trust and empathy to be able to take that case and bring it home.”

He strove to be the lawyer who was the most prepared, reading every page of the file before any trial or deposition.

“I always knew the case backward and forward so I could anticipate what was going to be thrown at me,” he says.

He partnered for a time with another attorney but returned to solo practice until 1993 when he teamed up with Randall Mainor, a former FBI agent who had become an effective civil litigator. Over the next decade, the partners built Mainor & Harris into a flourishing personal injury and construction defect law firm that handled nearly every major case in the state, from fires and explosions to airplane and helicopter crashes.

“There were lots of tragedies that we were able to jump in and help people out,” he says.

But in 2003, the firm imploded and the law partners endured a protracted and public legal battle in state and federal court over the firm’s assets. The split left Harris with having to start fresh at the age of 50. This time, however, he resolved to return to his family-business roots and build the firm around his son, Josh, who was admitted to the bar in 2005.

“Together we have re-built the firm to be even bigger and more successful than the Mainor & Harris firm, which was quite an historic firm in its day,” says Harris.

Mainor & Harris had 16 lawyers at its peak. The Richard Harris Law Firm now has 30 attorneys and is the largest personal injury law firm in Nevada with offices in Las Vegas and Reno.

“I’ve kind of repeated the mom-and-pop model that I was taught in the Hallmark store,” says Harris. “Even though we’re a fairly large firm with 130 people, it still really is a family business. It has that feel to it.”

His second son and his daughter also work for the firm. Jake does marketing and social media outreach, while Julianne is in charge of the trust fund and settlement checks.

“I get the opportunity to be with my kids every day,” says Harris. “There’s sort of the joke in the family, ‘Sorry, I wasn’t around when you were growing up but it’s great to work with you every day now.’”

As Harris worked to establish the new firm, he realized marketing and branding would play a critical role in raising the firm’s profile. While Mainor & Harris had not advertised at all, relying solely on word-of-mouth and referrals, Harris saw that advertising was now necessary to help quickly regrow the new firm and get back into the game.

“In order to compete and grow with the town, you have to market,” says Harris. “You do that on top of our referral-based practice, which is still the core of the business. I think the Richard Harris Law Firm is known for having both the ability to litigate, get big results, and that we market in a smart way that doesn’t offend the profession.”

Harris believes there are few lawyers who are exceptional trial attorneys and who also market well.

“There are a lot of attorneys who market well who aren’t necessarily very good attorneys,” he says. “You can market well and do very well – it doesn’t necessarily mean that you’re a great lawyer.”

The firm’s extensive marketing centers around Harris’s story, his family, and his love for Nevada. Its current commercials feature Harris and his son, Josh, at a local diner. Harris says the spots stand out from the competition because they are humorous and self-deprecating.

Online marketing includes a series of YouTube videos that the firm produces titled “Spirit of Nevada.” A brainchild of Harris’s, the more than 200 cinematic videos spotlight the state’s spectacular natural beauty and hidden one-of-a-kind hangouts that can be found beyond the sparkling lights of the Las Vegas strip.

“I really love Nevada and I wanted to start promoting Nevada through my law practice and let people know that I’m the guy who loves Nevada,” Harris explains. “I like the idea of being really proud of where you come from and then showcasing everything there is to do here and the hidden gems and the unique people.”

Primerus is another resource in the firm’s toolbox. In deciding to join two years ago, Harris says he was looking for an organization that had networking at its core.

“It fits everything I want out of an organization,” he says. “It’s got education, it’s got camaraderie. It’s a good organization.”

The firm’s marketing approach has been highly effective. The firm represented more victims of the mass shooting at the Route 91 Harvest music festival on the Las Vegas Strip in 2017 than any other firm. Harris estimates the firm fields hundreds of referrals a year from out-of-state lawyers.

All the print and broadcast advertising aside, however, Harris says communication, empathy, and hard work are still the benchmarks of the firm.

“I always tell people in my firm, you know, this is just my solo practice that got out of hand,” he says. “But the qualities and characteristics of my firm still reflect that solo practice one-on-one approach. Yesterday, I was a sole practitioner. Yesterday. That’s how it feels to me.”

For more than four decades, Harris has committed nearly all his energy and focus into building a law firm that can stand as a legacy and that is a testament to his commitment to be a “lawyer

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to the people.” The effort has often left little time for outside pursuits.

“I’m terrible about taking time for myself,” he says. “This summer, for the first time in 42 years, I actually spent about 80 percent of my time away from Las Vegas and the office. I was very proud of myself. I reset in a way I’d never done before.

Harris’s past and present are so enfolded in the law firm that it’s hard for him to imagine a future away from it.

“People ask when I’m going to retire, and I say why would I do that? I’ve got the greatest job in the world.”