

GETTING

# DOWN *to* BUSINESS

BY SHARON COLE

**J**ust as Frederick Leonhardt (JD 74) was about to sign with an established Tampa law firm upon graduation 30 years ago, providence intervened. He was approached by J. Hyatt Brown (JD 70), then a member of the Florida House of Representatives.

"He told me, 'You don't want to practice in a stodgy old law firm for your entire career...get out there and have more fun!'" Leonhardt said with a slight southern drawl.

Never one to back down from a challenge, the fearless Gator accepted.

He spent the next year serving as counsel to the House of Representatives, acting as attorney for the Committee on Growth and Energy. He wrote energy resource laws, was drawn into the exhilaration of law making, and fast became "hooked on government law."

"I quickly realized how many different points of view exist on any single issue," said Leonhardt. "Every time we thought we had an answer there was someone with a different perspective who wanted a different answer. We spent an inordinate amount of time working out solutions everyone could live with. It is a very healthy process for our form of government."

Leonhardt's time in the capital city would prove invaluable over the course of his career as he practiced government law and earned recognition, such as being named "Most Influential Business Person of the Year" by the *Orlando Business*



*Florida Trend* listed Leonhardt among the "Most Influential Floridians" in 2004.



## A ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

Fred Leonhardt opted for a more diverse career path. The journey, he says, has been well worthwhile.

## \*1974-75

*House of Representatives, Tallahassee*

Leonhardt was convinced by then House of Representatives member J. Hyatt Brown to join the legislative process. Leonhardt said yes and served as counsel to the House of Representatives for the Committee of Growth and Energy.

## \*1975-81

*Cobb & Cole, Daytona*

Leonhardt became partner at Cobb & Cole (then Cobb, Cole & Bell) in the Zoning, Environmental and Land Use department, run by friend and mentor Sam Bell. Leonhardt previously developed a relationship with Bell, having served as his campaign manager while he ran for legislature.

## \*1981-87

*Leonhardt and Upchurch, Daytona*

A jog with Circuit Judge John Upchurch along Daytona Beach led to the startup of a private practice run by Leonhardt and John and Paul Upchurch. As president, Leonhardt headed up the real estate and governmental practice there.

## \*1987-92

*Holland & Knight, Orlando*

The tide changed again for Leonhardt by 1987, when Holland & Knight gave him an offer he couldn't refuse — the opportunity to help establish their office in Orlando. Leonhardt was chairman of the real estate and environmental land use department.

## \*1992-Present

*GrayRobinson, Orlando*

Leonhardt now is a partner with GrayRobinson, chairing the government law department, policy board, practice development program and political action committee. "In 1992, Charlie Gray took me to dinner...by dessert I decided I wanted to be a law partner with GrayRobinson," said Leonhardt.

*Journal (OBJ)* in 2004 by an anonymous independent board. *Florida Trend* listed Leonhardt among the 174 "Most Influential Floridians" in its November 2004 issue.

"*Florida Trend's* publisher just handed me the November issue, and I was floored. Then I received a call from *OBJ*. What an honor... what a day," said an elated Leonhardt.

But it just may be that those early years in the House benefited him the most when he was elected chair of Florida's Chamber of Commerce for 2004, a commanding position in which he presided over the largest federation of businesses, chambers of commerce and business associations, representing more than 120,000 member business and three million employees in every legislative district.

During his year-long tenure, he pushed to raise the bar on the chamber's pro-business agenda, setting the stage for a more thoughtful constitutional amendment process in the business community — an accomplishment he counts among his most significant.

"Right now, Florida has one of the easiest constitutions in the country to amend, second only to California," said Leonhardt. "This wreaks havoc on businesses, which count on a stable environment to thrive."

Under the current law, amendments can slip by with little time for debate, like the one that regulated the size of pens for pregnant pigs. "That amendment basically put pig farmers out of business overnight," says Leonhardt. "Now every one of those farms is gone and every pig slaughtered because of it."

An amendment abolishing sales tax exemption did not make the ballot. "Businesses come to Florida *because* of sales tax exemption on their products," he said. "Imagine setting up or expanding your business here only to find out a year later your business products were not exempt."

As the result of his efforts, the chamber launched VoteSmartFlorida.org, an alliance

of citizen, business and community groups advocating solutions to the constitutional dilemma. That initiative succeeded in passing its "No Surprises" provision, which called for more sufficient time for amendment education and debate. It was placed on the Nov. 2, 2004 ballot, and passed easily.

The chamber's Political Institute — a million-dollar grassroots political action coalition made of proponents of a pro-business legislature — also was created during his chairmanship.

"I think I brought something to the table that members needed — a thorough understanding of legal implications and how constitutional amendments impact businesses," he said. "Members took great comfort in having someone with that knowledge representing them in Tallahassee." Leonhardt is just the third practicing lawyer to chair the chamber since 1980.

"If I could bottle and sell Fred's energy and enthusiasm for good causes I would be a millionaire," said Lt. Governor Toni Jennings, who supports his work in protecting businesses big and small. Jennings was the chamber's chair-elect when Gov. Jeb Bush named her his second in command. She then supported Leonhardt's succession to the nomination committee.

Sam Bell, a 14-year Florida legislator and honorary UF Blue Key member, agreed.

"Fred was my campaign manager when I ran for legislative office and we won. So that tells you something," said Bell.

Bell lured Leonhardt to the firm of Cobb & Cole in 1975, becoming his mentor and friend. "I like to say he's had excellent training," laughed Bell. "He has always been very well organized, attentive to detail and very articulate. He clearly represents the position of his clients today, and did so as a young man. I take a lot of pride in his success."

That success is evident in Leonhardt's work with GrayRobinson law firm in Orlando. Recent coups include represent-



ing a large international developer — Euro-American — that just broke ground on a \$200 million residential project in downtown Orlando. And it was his negotiations that successfully organized a team to build the new \$600 million expansion of the international convention center in Orlando.

“Our firm had three clients competing for that job and I convinced them to form a joint venture,” said Leonhardt. “The strategy worked. Our team won the project and built the convention center on time and under budget.”

Leonhardt credits the University of Florida, where he also earned a B.A. in psychology, with preparing him for his career with its “holistic approach to life.”

“Not only does UF have academic courses taught by exceptionally good people, it also offers numerous opportunities to develop all sides of one’s personality and perspective,” he said.

He took advantage of those opportunities by staying active in student government and serving as vice president of Florida Blue Key, president of his fraternity, Delta Chi, Gator Growl director and editor-in-chief of

*The Docket*, the UF law student newspaper. He also received a book award in a class on corporations, taught by visiting University of Michigan Professor Scott Van Alstyne, one of his most influential professors.

Looking back over his years in the legal profession, Leonhardt expresses unequivocal satisfaction for every decision he has made in regards to his career and his practice of law. While he shows no signs of slowing down his frenetic pace, he has, he says, found home. “This is it,” he concluded. “I’m settled now.”

Leonhardt and his wife, Vicki, reside in Orlando. ■

“HE IS PROBABLY THE BEST LAWYER LOBBYIST IN TALLAHASSEE. HIS ABILITY TO EVALUATE A SITUATION AND OBTAIN FAVORABLE RESULTS IS UNEQUALED.”

Leonhardt joined GrayRobinson in 1992. The firm is one of the largest in Florida with nine offices employing 200 lawyers. The full-service firm provides legal services for Fortune 500 companies, emerging businesses, lending institutions, local governments, major developers, entrepreneurs and individuals.

“I’ve watched Fred now for way over 10 years and I’ve seen him grow exponentially. He is probably the best lawyer lobbyist in Tallahassee,” said GrayRobinson Chairman of the Board and Founding Director Charles Gray (JD 58). “He is so energetic and dynamic that he naturally gravitates to the chairmanship of any organization he’s in. His ability to evaluate a situation and obtain favorable results is unequalled.”

That leadership includes serving as founding chairman of the Florida Sports Commission, president of the Central Florida Council of the Boy Scouts of America, and founding chairman of a school dropout prevention program in Orange County.

“Fred is always upbeat and optimistic,” said Robie Robinson (JD 66), a founding partner at GrayRobinson and former chairman of the Law Center Association Board of Trustees. “He can always find something nice to say about everyone.”

## From Young Democrat to GRAND OLD PARTY

It’s true. Leonhardt, a first-name basis Republican who served on the Bush-Cheney Finance Committee and played an active role in the recent Presidential election, once was a full-fledged Democrat. In fact, he was once president of the Florida Young Democrats in Volusia County.

“In 1979 I attended the Young Democrats State Convention. At that time, my mentors were people like Hyatt Brown and Sam Bell — both political moderates — which was characteristic of Democrats then,” said Leonhardt.

So why the switch in the late 1980s?

“What I sense today is that the moderate point of view is better reflected by Republicans than Democrats,” he said.

“I’ve also found by practicing law over the years and through community involvement, that Republicans have a better understanding of how the free enterprise system works,” he added.

“We have a greater appreciation for healthy business environments and how to let the entrepreneurial spirit thrive.”

He does point out that he doesn’t define people by party affiliation. “I support people more than parties.”

Leonhardt served on Gov. Jeb Bush’s Growth Management Study Commission, and is now on the board of directors of Enterprise Florida, a public-private partnership responsible for leading Florida’s statewide economic development efforts.