

Aleen Tiffany

McHenry County
Construction Lawyer
Devotes Curiosity,
Enthusiasm to Clients

by Chris Bailey



CRYSTAL LAKE — Math teacher. Sports agent. Favored aunt. Puzzle solver. Eager traveler. Enthusiastic athlete. Aleen R. Tiffany wanted to be all of them at some point in her life. Most became reality, but even those that didn't still infuse her life with curiosity and passion.

Not one to let life simply pass by, Tiffany attacks it with enthusiasm and passes that enthusiasm on to everyone who crosses her path, be they friend, colleague or family member.

When Tiffany merged her small Crystal Lake firm with **HeplerBroom LLC** early in 2016, she brought her background in construction litigation, contracts, risk transfer and complex civil and commercial litigation into a firm looking to expand both geographically and in the services it provides its clients. HeplerBroom has offices in Edwardsville, St. Louis, Springfield and Chicago in addition to the new office in Crystal Lake.

The path Tiffany took to reach that point

was anything but pre-ordained.

"I didn't have the law in my family, so it was a bit unusual," she says. "I was a math education major at the University of Illinois, with a computer science minor. I wanted to teach math at the high school or college level."

She followed that route through student teaching at a high school and found "nothing negative in the experience." But talking to an old friend who was in law school "triggered something" within her.

"I began to fear the daunting aspect of teaching," she says. "What about the kids you can't help? I think that would have bothered me. That and my intrigue with the law led me to change my major to mathematics with an economics minor, and I applied to law school."

She graduated from Illinois and then went on to John Marshall Law School in Chicago.

"The law is very mathematical, and I loved it pretty much immediately," says Tiffany. "I loved law school, while many

looked at it as just something they had to get through. We all try to find what drives us, find a niche. I think the law was probably the right choice for me."

When she graduated from John Marshall and passed the bar, she planned to become a sports agent. An inveterate tomboy, her love of sports manifests itself on her office walls and through her hobbies. Photos of Brett Favre hang next to a photo of a trip she and a friend took with the friend's children and Tiffany's nieces and nephews. They visited five Major League Baseball stadiums in six days. The photo features Fenway Park and the trip included old Yankee Stadium.

"We had an absolute blast," say Tiffany of the trip. "Most people are stunned at the tale, thinking it was a bit of a whirlwind. But it was one of those trips that still makes me smile."

She loves scuba diving and golf and played competitive slow- and fast-pitch softball for many years before bowing out about 10 years ago. She helped coach her



Illinois Association of Defense Trial Counsel 2016 holiday party/charity fundraiser. From left: IDC Exec. Dir. Sandra Wulf; former IDC presidents J. Howard Jump, Tiffany, Anne M. Oldenburg; IDC President R. Mark Mifflin



HeplerBroom LLC Chicago-area office party with lawyers and staff from Tiffany's prior firm. From left: Tiffany, Jennifer Zittler, Troy Bozarth, Jamie Rein, Kristi Fitzgerald and Holly Whitlock

nephews in Little League and proudly states that she “always got picked before the last guy” in the playground ritual of “choosing up sides.” University of Illinois athletes were among her friends during her undergrad days, which helped fuel her interest in the sports law arena.

Discovering Taste for Litigation

Wishes don't pay the bills, though, so while she hunted down the sports agent dream, she found a job that paid real money — as a litigator. She joined a firm in Woodstock, Querrey & Harrow, where she got her first taste of civil defense work and construction litigation.

“If you enjoy being a trial lawyer, once you get a taste of it, it's hard to move away from it,” says Tiffany. “I also met my oldest and dearest client there, so I will always be thankful.”

What began as a family construction firm known as Trench-It grew into nationwide utility infrastructure construction specialist Intren, Inc. She says they are fantastic people who chose her to represent them when she had only a year or two of legal experience. “I feel like I grew up with them,” she says.

When a group of Querrey & Harrow attorneys split off to form O'Hagan, Smith & Amundsen four years after Tiffany joined the firm, Tiffany went with them, following her closest colleagues and friends, including Glen Amundsen. His firm is now SmithAmundsen LLC.

“I am so proud to have Glen as a trusted friend and mentor all of these years,” says Tiffany.

“Aleen has a competitive part of her,” says Amundsen. “She was made to be a

litigator, in the best sense of the word. For her, it was a calling, not just a job. She was constantly looking for ways to learn and improve, and that's a hallmark of successful people in all walks of life. For Aleen, good enough was not good enough. For her, failure is not an option. That's why her clients are so loyal to her. They know she has their back.”

When Tiffany decided eight years later to form her own firm, it was painful for both of them.

“I was looking for something different, so I took the jump and decided to open my own office,” says Tiffany. “But it was the hardest thing I had done, personally or professionally. It was incredibly difficult to leave.”

“She made a decision that was best for her, but it wasn't easy,” says Amundsen. “I didn't want her to leave, but she was a friend. She's a gutsy lady. I told her I knew she could do it. I thought she had the strength and confidence to do it and then make it the right decision. She grew up as a lawyer where clients' interests were considered paramount. I hope she learned some of that from me.”

Thus it was that at 10 p.m. on Feb. 28, 2005, she put the finishing touches on some work and packed boxes at a Chicago skyscraper. By 8 a.m. the next day she was in her small Crystal Lake office.

“All by myself, with a laptop on a folding table,” she says, obviously recalling the stark loneliness of the moment.

Tiffany felt incredibly fortunate to have a nationally based client who wanted to leave the firm with her. She felt badly enough about it to apologize to Amundsen.

She says Amundsen told her: “Let's see. We got this client from a cold call. You developed a relationship with that client. They now think highly of this firm and you. And you think you should apologize for that?”

“Only a person of Glen's caliber would view it that way, so automatically and easily,” says Tiffany. Amundsen's memories are similar, though slightly different.

“I had introduced her to the client, but she turned it into a great relationship. She earned it and it would have been improper to try to intervene. And the client probably wouldn't have liked it much, either. Once she was a subordinate, but by then Aleen had become a colleague, a peer and a friend. There was plenty of work to go around. I felt good that she left the firm on very good terms. They threw a party for her and even invited some of the clients she was taking with her.”

With that sort of support, she never looked back. And the relationships all survived.

“I will always be so grateful,” she says.

“I think the world of them. They are great lawyers and friends, and they have been so kind to me all of these years.”

“She has collaborated with us; when we needed an outsider or an additional counsel, it was possible to reach out to her,” says Amundsen. “And she has referred business to us, too. I trust her implicitly.”

By the time she merged with HeplerBroom 11 years later, her office also included two other lawyers and two contracting lawyers.

“I’ve been lucky to be surrounded by fabulous people who have made me a better lawyer, manager and, I hope, friend.”

About the merger, she says it was the right time for her. “I wanted to give my team more options. And I was ready to have partners again. The right partners. My friends at HeplerBloom had the same approach to life and career as I do. I’ve known so many of the folks here for so long. I knew it was the right fit for the next step in my career and life. I’m excited to be part of their growth, and I learn from them every day.”

Family Fuels Her Passion

That approach includes big doses of hard work and commitment to family. She calls her mom, Charlaïne, and her youngest sister, Kathleen, the “artsy, creatively gifted” ones in the family. Another sister, Shannon, is an actuary. Her brother, Flynn, is an electrical engineer.

“We older three are the geeky, mathematical ones, I’m afraid,” she says. “But don’t tell them I said that.”

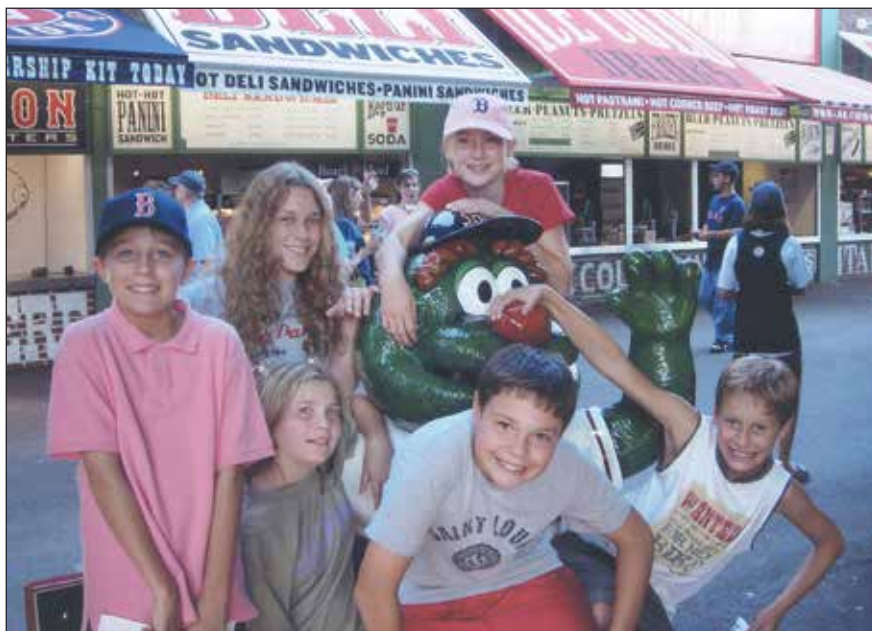
Her relationships with her nieces and nephews — and other young friends she calls her “pseudo-stepchildren” — may be the ones she treasures most, though. She has traveled with them, been at all their big days over the years, and loved talking with them as they grew up.

“I’ve enjoyed watching them make their way through the early stages of life. I enjoy their passion and am very thankful to be a part of their lives,” says Tiffany. “I wanted to be there for them as they grew up and now when they think they need it. I’m not certain they actually still need us. They just think they do, and I think it helps them when we ask poignant questions that help them figure their way themselves.”

Though her father, Arthur, died three years ago, Tiffany still calls him a “treasured friend.” And she says it was watching him and working for him that taught her a work ethic and to be curious about the world. For years he traveled daily from McHenry to Chicago, where he was vice president and operations manager for a vending machine company. As kids, she and her



At Ireland’s famed Ballybunion Golf Club in 2001. From left: friends Laura and Glen Amundsen, Tiffany



Outside Fenway Park in 2007. Back row, from left: friends Morgan and Chloe; front row, from left: nephew Christopher, niece Bradleigh, nephew Adam, friend Noah



Tiffany (back row, far right) and family at her brother Flynn’s 1998 wedding in Glenview

siblings worked part-time putting little toy soldiers into capsules that came out of gumball-like machines.

“I worked part-time for Dad until I went to law school, both on the floor and out front,” says Tiffany. “I learned how to work, how to meet my responsibilities. And I learned how to work with other people and earn their respect. The boss’s kid can’t mess around!”

Her father, an avid reader, had an incredible intellect and a near-insatiable thirst for knowledge. They worked the *New York Times* crossword puzzle together every Sunday for years, which may explain her fascination with puzzles.

“I never knew a Sunday *New York Times* crossword he couldn’t or didn’t conquer,” says Tiffany. “Daunting, really — and rather annoying, too!”

But her parents did her another giant favor in her eyes.

“The interesting thing I remember was always assuming I would go to college, yet I have no memory of any conversation implying I had to,” says Tiffany. “He and Mom always told me, ‘You can do anything you want.’”

She carried much of her father and her family with her as she began solidifying her place in the law.

“People always say trial work can’t be personal. But it has to be personal. If not, how are you properly interested? You need to care about the outcome, about the client’s needs. And those needs are not always about money. This is not a 9 to 5 job, so you better be invested.”

That said, she also leaves any conflict at the courtroom door as far as colleagues go.

“I am proud that I can leave and be friends afterward,” she says. “It’s rare that I can’t walk out of a trial with an opponent and have a beer.”

She says that while she is passionate about her work, she is not immune to being frustrated by it.

“Civil justice can be hard to find,” she says. “We are so often bogged down in requisite procedure that it can be difficult for a client to stomach or afford. In a vacuum, it seems easy to fix.”

But a courtroom isn’t a vacuum, and progress can be tedious.

“We must all work together as best we can to streamline matters and keep costs down for clients,” says Tiffany.

Fixing Complex Messes

She also finds construction contracting challenging, where others might find it tedious, because it involves contractors up and downstream, risk evaluation and transfer, and laws that differ from state to state.

“If it’s challenging, it’s more fun,” she says.

That’s why Tiffany enjoys risk transfer work to the point it has become a niche and a teaching topic for her. Risk transfer basically boils down to negotiating as much risk as possible onto someone else while remaining in a sound business relationship with them.

“Everybody involved has insurance and contract obligations, but there are so many moving parts, each situation is like having a different puzzle to solve,” she says. “It’s not the same thing coming across my desk over and over. If somebody gets injured and sues, and my client is sitting in the middle, it becomes fun to find the cost-effective and efficient solution. They have business relationships to maintain, too, and part of my job is to help them maintain them.”

While others might drown in the minutiae or shudder at the notion of trying to balance those delicate relationships, Tiffany revels in them.

“I like fixing the mess,” she says. And she works hard to maintain long-term relationships with her clients.

“They don’t want an answer with 17 caveats, they don’t want a CYA answer,” says Tiffany. “They want your best recommendation with a truthful assessment of their prospects.”

As she has grown older, Tiffany has also devoted more time to mentoring young lawyers, both in her firm and through her long association with the Illinois Association of Defense Trial Counsel (IDC).

“I really enjoy it, which probably comes from my early interest in teaching,” says Tiffany. “I get a reward from mentoring and helping lawyers. When you recognize talent and dedication, you want them to find the path.”

“I am amazed at how genuine she is,” says Sandra Wulf, executive director of the IDC and not an attorney. “She is so easy to talk to, and those who just graduated are looking for a mentor. She is open to thoughts and ideas. And I wish I could duplicate her liveliness, knowledge and enthusiasm.”

“I didn’t need to inspire her to lead,” says Wulf of Tiffany’s term as IDC president. “From publications to web design, to board and committees, she was involved in every aspect. It was a huge commitment when she had her own small firm to run. And at the end of her presidency, she also co-chaired the IDC’s 50th-anniversary gala.”

Tiffany, whom Wulf calls thoughtful, funny and generous, is “the sort (of person who) listens to the ideas of others, runs with them if they are good, and deliberates on others that need refinement.”

The current IDC president, Mark Mifflin, says Tiffany has pushed the IDC toward more advocacy using *amicus curiae*

briefs and the legislative committee.

“She’s so level-headed; she doesn’t get ruffled,” says Mifflin. “She applies common sense to everything. She is empathetic and tries to understand before jumping into a discussion. She makes everyone feel like they got a fair shake even if she doesn’t agree with them.”

Mifflin also considers Tiffany a good friend. “I live in Springfield, so I don’t see her all that often. But if I needed help, personally or professionally, I’d call on her.”

Loving Vigorous Debate

Laura Amundsen has known Tiffany for more than 20 years, both professionally and personally.

“We met when I was new to the area and she was an associate in Woodstock,” says Amundsen. “She made me laugh and had a great sense of humor. And she had that great big belly laugh.”

They did a few things socially together, and the relationship bloomed into friendship. Although everyone stops short of calling Tiffany a matchmaker, she was the at the heart of Laura and Glen Amundsen meeting and then marrying. Laura Amundsen calls Tiffany a good friend to her and her husband.

“She’s very generous with her time and is compassionate, no matter who or what situation is involved. Clients have told me that talking to her is like talking to a friend. She’s an awesome lady.”

And she’s a woman with the skills to resurrect an art nearly lost in the modern-day — being part of a lively, thoughtful, non-confrontational discussion between people of differing views.

“She loves the back and forth discussion,” says Laura. “She’s game for the banter and isn’t condescending or threatening. She has young adults in her life, and they have been in her life since they were little. She engages them in conversations like that. And that’s very hard for them to find in this internet age.”

“I do enjoy surrounding myself with people who challenge me and who don’t mind being challenged,” says Tiffany. “I have a crazy need to understand an opposing viewpoint, even while trying to convince someone to understand mine.”

“It may not lead either of us to change our respective opinions, but it does help build respect and perhaps even acceptance of differing conclusions.” ■