

# Barth X. deRosa

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## The Inner Voice

Sitting in the quiet solitude of the garden and reflecting on the twenty years of life he had lived so far, Bart deRosa heard something. It wasn't coming from the world around him, however; it was coming from within him. And it wasn't a transient, temporary sound; it had a timeless, certain kind of resonance—something not only greater than the earth, but beyond it, that had always been with him and would always remain.

Bart had always been a spiritual person, and St. Francis College, complete with its rural Pennsylvania landscape and natural wonder, was an idyllic place for the periods of personal reflection he was so drawn to. As such, he had been led by his inner voice before, but in that moment, it sounded different. Its scope echoed not within the confines of his own mind, but extended out through time, defining a horizon Bart didn't even know he had. "When it comes to conceptualizing of one's life, I think people have horizons of different lengths," he remarks today. "Some see a month into the future, while others see years—three, five, ten. In that moment, I realized I was blessed with a thirty-year horizon. I suddenly saw myself going into law, practicing in Washington, D.C. and becoming a partner someday. Thanks to that voice, it was all very clear."

Bart had just spent the summer working in a laboratory where he met a young woman who struck him in a profound way, and though they weren't meant to be lifelong partners, she inspired him to think beyond the immediate and into the future, imagining the kind of life he'd like to live. And upon hearing that voice in the garden that day, he was inspired beyond imagination to action. Now a member of Dickinson Wright, PLLC, a prominent national law firm specializing in over 40 practice areas, Bart's life course has unfolded according to that divine cadence with its

omniscient timber, and its subtle elegance shows in the details. "I've learned to trust my inner voice, and to rely on it," he affirms today. "It's never let me down, and I have tremendous faith in it."

Dickinson Wright is a Detroit-based firm with around 400 lawyers spread between its twelve U.S. offices and one office in Toronto, Canada. Founded in 1876, it has since developed a deep tradition of excellence in law and prudence in business. Paired with its close-knit company culture, complete with special Christmas dinners that bring its partners together every holiday season, Dickinson Wright attracts competent, high caliber lawyers who have gone on to become governors and state Supreme Court justices.

Bart came to the firm in February of 2008, where he specializes in intellectual property law with an emphasis on trademark and copyright law, including enforcement litigation and practice before the U.S. Trademark Trial and Appeal Board of the United States Patent and Trademark Office. He also provides general counseling on most aspects of business law, with an expertise in brand development, licensing, and the intellectual property due diligence aspects of corporate mergers and acquisitions. Yet even though he grew up in D.C. as the son of a prominent trademark lawyer who was one of the original twelve lawyers hired to administer the Lanham Act of 1946, he never planned on following in his father's footsteps and actually walked his own route to the profession.

Bart did, however, inherit his father's sense of humor and his mother's intuitive nature, which would become critical coping mechanisms through a childhood that found him transferring schools too often to establish a sense of stability and comfort. After kindergarten and first grade, he was sent to a private school that required him to repeat first grade. His family then moved further



north, landing him in a school that had him skip second grade to enter third. Then, because of population growth, he was sent to a new school district for fifth and sixth grades. He was then sent to a Catholic parochial school in Silver Spring before he ultimately settled at St. Johns Military College High School, D.C.'s junior ROTC Catholic military school. "As soon as I'd get my footing in one school, I was sent to another," Bart remembers. "This left me extremely disengaged academically, and I did the bare minimum to get by."

Despite his academic challenges, Bart made close—albeit mischievous—friends in high school and really began to come into his own. "I remember hitchhiking down Rockville Pike with my friend Mike, looking for a job. We walked into Shakey's Pizza and asked for an application," Bart recounts. "The manager asked if we were tall enough to reach the ovens, which unfortunately, we weren't. On those grounds, he said he couldn't hire us." Together, Bart and Mike caddied at the local country club and worked in restaurants as busboys, dishwashers, shorthand cooks, and waiters. "My lifelong friend was instrumental in showing me how to break down barriers and do what's necessary to get a job," says Bart.

Next to his older brother and sister, who were national scholars, Bart's academic performance did not inspire the confidence of his parents. His mother suggested he consider trade school as a viable option, but despite his lack of interest in his studies, that inner voice was resolute that he not give up yet. With that, he graduated and enrolled at St. Francis College, now St. Francis University. Then, after seeing his thirty-year horizon at the outset of his third year, he transferred to George Washington University and fully immersed himself in his studies for the first time in his life. He got a part time research job at the National Legal Center for Public Interest, where his boss took a special interest in him and became his first mentor. "Leonard J. Theberge was a former assistant U.S. attorney for New York City and a Rhodes scholar," Bart explains. "He was charismatic and brilliant. I worked with him until I enrolled in the University of Georgia Law School in 1979. It was a tremendous opportunity to work with Mr. Theberge. I met key business leaders, Supreme Court nominees, members of Congress, and a number of Nobel laureates."

When he earned his law degree in 1982, Bart hoped to go into environmental and energy

law, but as the Reagan administration was cutting EPA funding, jobs in that field were scant. He had an offer from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to oversee fishing quotas off the coast of Massachusetts but didn't foresee much of a future on that track. That's when his father suggested he try working at the firm where he'd built his own career, Watson Cole Grindle and Watson. It was 1982, and his father was in the process of helping the firm facilitate the signing of a licensing agreement that gave their client the rights to produce and market Trivial Pursuit. "That was my introduction to law in the real world, and it was a lot of fun," Bart remembers.

During that time, a beautiful woman with two small children moved in several houses down from Bart. Mary was half Italian and half Sicilian, just like him, and one Friday night, he found himself armed with a cannoli and knocking on her door. She invited him in for dinner, and the two hit it off immediately. "I knew by the second date that we were meant for each other," he laughs. "She understands me in a way nobody else does, and she has this incredibly calming effect about her. If she were a newscaster and an atomic war were about to start, she'd be the one who could calm everyone down."

The two married and were blessed with two additional children. While Bart found his family life blossoming, unfortunately the professional atmosphere around him was less promising. Despite the firm's success since 1864, the concept of investing in the firm had not been embraced by the time Bart's father retired in 1988. It lacked the technological advancement and innovative drive of its competitors, which frustrated a young and forward-thinking attorney like Bart. That's why, in 1995, he helped the firm merge with another practice, Stevens Davis Miller and Mosher, LLP. The two firms complemented each other well for the next two years, until the Stevens Davis partners decided to pull out and invited Bart to join them. With that, the firm was reconstituted with four equity partners and grew to 25 lawyers. "We were a great firm with a strong culture, history, and partners, but as time went by we began to have different ideas of where we wanted to go," Bart reflects. "When our lease was about ready to expire, we decided to merge with a general practice firm. We met with ten major firms, from which we chose Dickinson Wright."

Bart's experience at Dickinson Wright has been rewarding and successful, earning him nominations as a D.C. Super Lawyer for 2012, 2013, and 2014, as well as a *Washington Post* rating as a top attorney in the D.C. area for each of those three years. Yet despite his love of law, Bart came to find himself disillusioned with the shifts of modernity that have deemphasized direct communication between lawyer and client. "I love engaging with clients, talking with them and getting to know their businesses, families, successes, and failures," he remarks. "But everything is done now through email, which is a great tool but has become the brick wall in developing those relationships that really drive me."

If a lack of human connection formed the bricks of Bart's obstacle, a lack of creative opportunity formed its mortar. "I'm a builder," he asserts. "I have this drive to create—this sense that there's always something to build that's greater than myself." When his firm merged back in 1995, he had the opportunity to have his hand in multiple pots, building the company website and establishing its culture as he practiced law. Then, as an equity partner in a four-person firm, he was constantly involved in major decision-making that took him beyond the day-to-day. "I enjoyed those things so much that I've always wanted to start a side business to see what I could do with my creative energies," he says. "Mary was very supportive of the idea, but something would always intervene and I never seemed to have the time to actually pursue it."

All that changed, however, when Bart found himself at a legal conference in November of 2010. Exploring the art galleries of Phoenix's Scottsdale neighborhood, he stumbled across an olive oil and vinegar store, and the inner voice in his head said, "This is it."

True to form, Bart had been dedicating time to contemplating life and asking himself the kinds of questions that his inner voice is so good at answering. What did he and Mary enjoy? What was new; novel; up-and-coming? With that, and together with his continued 32-year dedication to law, Bart enlisted Mary's help and began pursuing his entrepreneurial dreams.

At first glance, an olive oil and vinegar store was a perfect venue to bring together the deRosas' love of art, antiques, and fine Mediterranean cuisine, but they were committed

to exploring the idea much deeper. They researched extensively and took a trip to California to meet producers face-to-face. They found a location in Bethesda and developed a logo and decorating scheme, diving head first into the minutia of entrepreneurial creativity that Bart finds so rewarding.

Now the proud cofounders of SECOLARI, which means "age-old," the deRosas opened the first store of its kind in the D.C. metropolitan area and won a Best of Bethesda award for 2013. It features 30 different varieties of olive oils, vinegars, balsamic, and special oils, and has garnered enough success to warrant the launch of a second store, which opened its doors in December 2013 at the mall in Columbia, Maryland. "Growing businesses and selling olive oil is my passion," Bart says, speaking expertly on everything from the health benefits of his product to the climate, transportation, and labeling standards he adheres to which ensure such high quality. "It gets me out and meeting people, which I love." So much so, that Bart was elected to the Board of Directors for the California Olive Oil Council—the industry's trade, marketing, and certifying organization located in Berkley, California. He is the first non-California resident to sit on the Board in its twenty-year history.

This love is at the root of Bart's professional journey, and of the advice he extends to young people entering the working world today. "Do what you're passionate about, wherever that leads you," he says. And if one is to find out what that is, one must be able to tune out the din of the world—a task of mounting difficulty, considering the perpetual noise of advertising, social media, and our culture of perpetual connectivity. In a society where we're always plugged in to the world around us, it's important to take the time to plug into the voice within us, allowing it to speak to the path that's right for us. "I know there's something greater out there that stays with all of us," Bart affirms. "It's like a guiding light and a feeling of well-being. Listen to it, trust it, and have faith in it, and it will guide you to where it wants you to go."

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