

# Attorney Joe DiBrigida

INTERVIEW

By Jeff Feingold

As the new year began, Joe DiBrigida officially took the reins as managing partner of one of Manchester-based Sheehan Phinney Bass + Green.

While no one officially keeps track of such things, the 43-year-old DiBrigida is apparently one of the youngest, if not the youngest, attorneys to head up one of the state's largest law firms. But his long association with the firm – where he began working as a summer clerk nearly 20 years ago – gives him an intimate familiarity of Sheehan Phinney's place in New Hampshire's, and New England's, legal landscape.

**Q.** What's the job of a managing partner?

**A.** Essentially you're the CEO of the firm. You're thinking strategically about the direction the firm should go in and implementing a strategic plan, which is one of the things we're in the process of doing right now. We've got some certain core ideas that we know we want to implement, but getting it all wrapped up in a plan is what we're doing over the next few months.

You have overall responsibility for oversight and every facet of the firm, from personnel, hiring and firing decisions, profitability, developing new practice areas, opening of new offices, business combinations.

**Q.** How is someone selected to be a managing partner?

**A.** It's an elected position by the shareholders of the firm. It's for a three-year term. Most of our managing partners in the past have served two terms, so it's a six-plus year commitment. We have an internal process where we have sort of a nominating committee that goes out and interviews all the shareholders to determine who they feel the next person should be.

**Q.** The job must consume a lot of time. How does that affect your practice as a lawyer?

**A.** I'm amazed at how much time it's taking. I had thought, based on past experience, that I'd be able to practice law about a third of my time and spend the other two-thirds managing. Maybe that will turn out to be the case a year down the road, but it's definitely not the case right now.

I thought that I would be able to come in and spend one-third of my day on client work – I'm lucky if I get an hour or two of client work in in a day, just because we've got so many other things going on.

The theory is that you can still be practicing law, and I want to be practicing law because I don't want to, in six or seven years, have skills that are rusty and client relationships that have gone away. I want to still keep my hand in it.

**Q.** It seems that the legal industry, like just about every other, has undergone a lot of change since you started in the profession.

**A.** In general, I think that the law business is becoming much more regional, much more competitive.

I always joke that, when I entered law school in 1985, the law was just a profession, and when I came



'I always joke that, when I entered law school in 1985, the law was just a profession, and when I came out in '88 it became a business,' says Joe DiBrigida, managing partner of Sheehan Phinney Bass + Green. (Photo by Jodie Andruskevich)

out in '88 it became a business. It seems like that's when it happened, because from that point forward, the law become more businesslike, more competitive. It was really the advent of the whole advertising and marketing phenomenon.

Law firms began getting much more aggressive in attracting clients and attracting other lawyers' clients, and we started seeing this huge expansion in the size of law firms, almost overnight.

**Q.** When you say, "thinking strategically" about the law, what do you mean?

**A.** I think that to remain competitive, law firms need not only to defend the clients they're currently working with, but they need to find niches or strategies for growing themselves.

For us, that strategy is to become much more regional. That's why we opened our office in Boston about three years ago. I think we were the first New Hampshire-based law firm to open up a full-service Boston office. We recently hired two additional senior attorneys for that office, which brings our lawyers count now to four. And we moved to a new space that basically doubles the size of our offices. We've got room for probably eight or 10 attorneys, and our plan is to grow that office aggressively to fill those offices and try to attack the Boston market.

**Q.** Are those just clients that have business or interest in New Hampshire?

**A.** No. They may have interest in New Hampshire, but not necessarily. What we have seen is a tremendous number of business out there in the whole high-tech belt around Boston that we consider sort of middle-market. They're not big enough to be retaining a large Boston firm, all of which have become national, but they are in need of sophisticated legal advice — the kind of advice we can provide.

We believe that our combination of Boston presence and New Hampshire home base allows us to offer sophisticated legal advice at prices that are below what most businesses have to pay in Massachusetts for comparable advice. That's the market we're aimed at — offering a legal product

that's priced below what the Boston-based firm can offer. I think there's a lot of room for growth there.

**Q.** You concentrate much of your practice on telecommunications law. Is that something you planned on doing while at law school?

**A.** It was serendipity, actually. When I started here, the partner I began working with was Brad Cook. He had represented a fellow by the name of Jeff Shapiro, who had purchased a radio station in Claremont at the time. I started helping Brad out. It turned that Jeff and his partners were a year ahead of me at Dartmouth, so there was this natural connection, so I developed a relationship with those guys.

As they began to grow, the radio work that we did began to grow, and with anything, once you get one good client you get known for doing good work for them, word spreads and you get a second radio client and a third radio client, and all of a sudden a specialty starts to develop.

**Q.** So you've seen the whole development of this trend over the last 15 years or so of emergence of these giant media conglomerates.

**A.** When the Telecommunications Act allowed for operators to own more than one FM station in a market, the whole idea of duopoly became very popular, and that started this feeding frenzy of radio station sales. It's just ramped up since then.

Now you can own all kinds of configurations of AMs and FMs and other publications in the same market, and it's allowed the Clear Channels of the world to come into being.

**Q.** What do you listen to on the radio?

**A.** I listen to all kinds of stuff. I still think there's a tremendous need for local broadcasting, which is one reason I'm not big fan of satellite radio.

I listen to everything from NHPR, a couple of different classic rock stations, and I'm a big fan of the folk and rock mix format of The River a lot. And I'll always listen to the stations that my clients have — but they're mostly out of the area now. **NHR**