

BOB VARNEY

High-yield Career for Central Illinois Defense Litigator

by Elizabeth Davies

BLOOMINGTON—On Sunday night, when Robert T. Varney looks out over his 240 acres of corn and soybeans, he knows the hard work he poured into those fields will yield a reward.

And on Monday morning, when he heads into his office at Robert T. Varney & Associates, he can be certain that same farmer's tenacity will get the job done in his legal practice as well.

"In farming, when you have a challenge, you work until you solve it," Varney says. "Same thing with a lawsuit: You work to resolve it in a cost-effective manner."

Growing up on a livestock farm in central Illinois, Varney found that hard work was second nature to him. He never would have thought of eating breakfast before the animals did, or of turning in for the night before his work was done. That's precisely how he practices law as well.

"I enjoy hard work, and there's a lot of hard work in the law," he says.

These days, Varney spends most of his time working in defense litigation, representing clients that range from national corporations to small-town farmers. But on the weekends, you'll find Varney on the old family homestead.

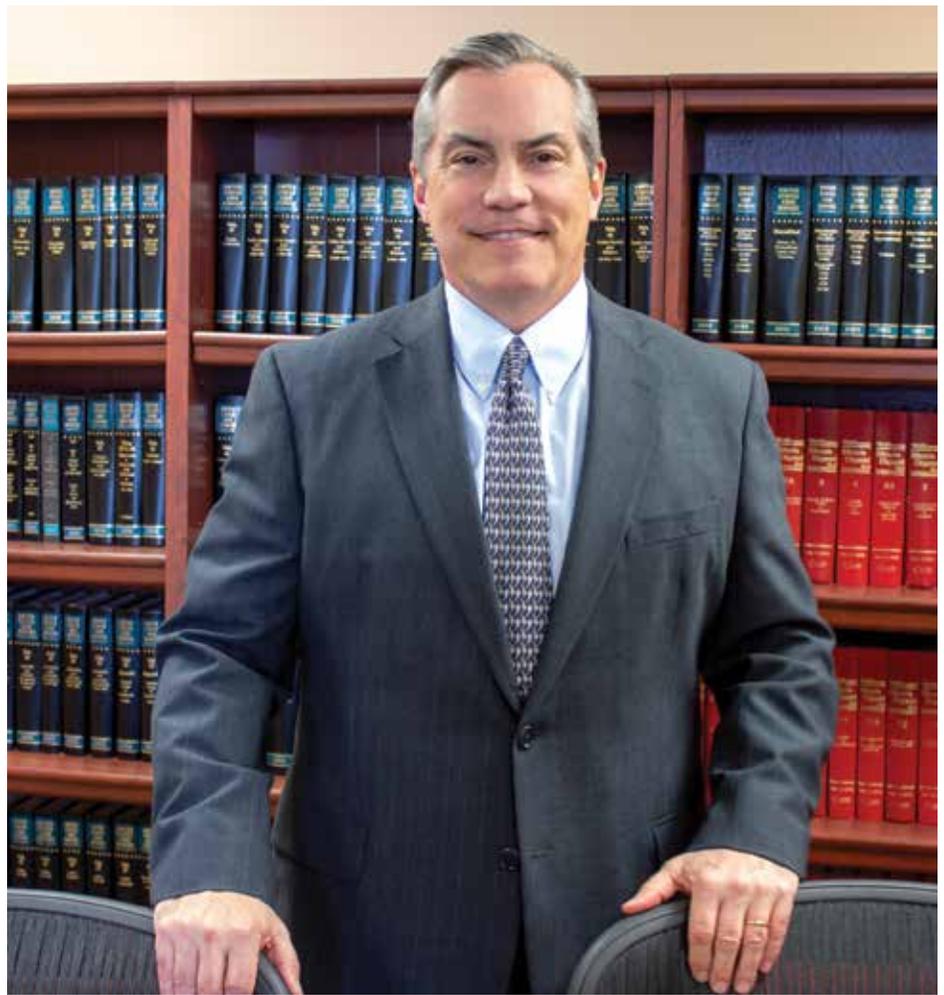
"It's a nice change from what I do during the week," he says. "It also helps me relate to the problems my clients are facing."

He works the same farm that's been in his family since 1851, growing up in a house built by his great-great-grandfather in 1869. And though no other Varney before him was a lawyer, he sees easy parallels between his career and his weekend passion.

Farmers tend to plant their crops in good weather and in good soil, he explains. But just as happens in a lawsuit, "everything changes out there, so you have to be able to adapt for a successful outcome."

AN EARLY START

Growing up in the small town of Delavan, Varney was raised by a school teacher and a farmer. Though he loved farm life, Varney



knew early on that he wanted to be a lawyer.

He remembers precisely the words that had him focused on a life in the law: "When you are a lawyer," a family member told him, "you know the rules the game of life is played by."

Fascinated with that idea, Varney headed to the University of Illinois to secure a degree in political science. But he was directed instead

farm fields of central Illinois and took a job doing product liability and insurance defense work with a Chicago law firm.

The experience gave him a broader perspective and a wide networking circle that set him up for success when he returned to Bloomington in 2001 to open Robert T. Varney & Associates.

"Working in a large city let me meet a lot of different people and try a lot of different cases," he says. "In fact, when I came down here, my first client's name was familiar, and it ended up that I had worked with his father in Chicago."

Varney went on to establish a solid reputation for himself in central Illinois as a lawyer who was not only skillful but also kind and caring.

"Bob is a very down-to-earth, practical person who does not get rattled," says Steve Heine, who belongs to the Association of Defense Trial Attorneys with Varney. "He's very calm, patient and empathetic."

Heine has worked on various cases with Varney over the past two decades. Heine points to Varney's sensibilities as a farmer as a trait that sets him apart.

"He has the ability to relate to a lot of

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to agriculture economics—a degree he didn't even know existed—and learned some of the farming industry basics that help him in his practice today. He continued at the University of Illinois College of Law and graduated planning to pursue litigation.

"I'm a people person, so that drew me toward litigation," he says. "And as a small business owner, it made sense to do defense work."

But at the start of his career, Varney left the

people who make up the general population of Illinois,” he says. “It’s not just people who wear suits and ties.”

Heine recalls a recent complicated injury case in which he and Varney represented co-defendants. The plaintiff had lost an eye and endured brain damage, but a series of errors contaminated evidence before lawyers had become involved. That led to layers of extra complications in the case.

“Between the two of us and some of the other lawyers, everyone worked together to get the job done,” Heine says.

TODAY’S LEGAL PRACTICE

When Varney opened his firm in 2001, he tried to develop a culture that encompassed the best qualities of Midwestern values. Not long ago, he asked the other three lawyers in his firm to characterize the practice. The words they used—responsive, teamwork, high-quality results, effective, dependable and business-minded—are precisely the traits he was going for.

“What it comes down to is you have to respect people,” he says. “I never say something is a mistake. It’s a problem with our process. Let’s look at the process to try to correct it.”

With significant experience in the risk industry, Varney’s practice includes work in insurance law, as well as transportation, construction and environmental law. He tackles issues such as product liability and slip-and-fall cases for national retailer Hobby Lobby. “I’m doing what I want to do, where I want to do it,” he says.

Like other lawyers, Varney finds it a challenge to manage the expectations coming from different directions: clients, jurors, judges and opposing lawyers. But his down-home farmer image has proven to be a boost before juries, who see him as honest and forthright. He says that’s because he truly believes in the clients he represents.

“If you try to sell something you don’t believe in, you’re going to appear phony,” he says.

It helps that, at his core, Varney is a nice guy. Not long ago, he began the deposition of a widowed plaintiff with kindness: “I’m really sorry for your loss,” he said. Those sincere words went a long way toward generating goodwill with the opposing side.

Part of being a successful litigator is “realizing it isn’t just about laying out facts, but that there are people with their own story,” Varney says.

“No matter whether you’re working with the judge’s clerk, clients, or a jury, it’s a people business. It comes down to being face-to-face, in my opinion.”

Tim Kelly of Kelly Law Offices P.C. has

known Varney for more than 20 years. The men have been opposing counsel, co-counsel, business partners and friends. They first met on opposing sides of a personal injury case.

“Bob is one of the most honest, honorable and ethical attorneys I have ever encountered,” Kelly says. “He exudes dignity and class in his handling of cases on a very consistent basis. He is one of the best defense counsel I have known over my career.”

AWAY FROM THE OFFICE

When he’s not at the office or in the farm field, Varney keeps busy with a roster of volunteer involvement.

He is the current Illinois chair for the Association of Defense Trial Attorneys. He is also a member of the International Association of Defense Counsel, the Illinois Association of Defense Counsel and the Defense Research Institute.

He is involved with the McLean County Bar Association and the Illinois State Bar Association, where he served as an Assembly Member for five years. He is a McLean County Arbitrator and a former Cook County Arbitrator.

He was once involved with the Robert E. Underwood Inns of Court, the Appellate Lawyers Association, the National Association of Railroad Trial Council, the Chicago Bar Association and the Trial Lawyers Club of Chicago.

These days, he is active with the American Red Cross of the Heartland, having served as a board member, chairman and vice chair. He was on the board and a past president of the Illinois Heart and Lung Foundation. He also served on the McLean County Chamber of Commerce board.

Varney enjoys reading, golfing, traveling, visiting his two grown sons and attending home games for the Fighting Illini.

A while back, a client introduced Varney and his wife to the Kansas City Barbeque Society. Now he and wife, Vicki, are judges for barbecue competitions.

“I feel like a bit of a fraud,” Varney laughs. “I haven’t done much barbecue cooking, but I judge it all the time!”

But a fraud, Varney certainly is not. His reputation throughout central Illinois is based on honesty, integrity and transparency—all what you would expect of a Midwestern farmer.

“Bob was born and raised on a farm...and he has what some folks would refer to as a ‘farmer work ethic’ in that he doesn’t shy away from hard work and long hours,” says lawyer Kelly.

“In fact, he seems to thrive under those conditions. He is an excellent lawyer and a credit to the profession.” ■