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Freeborn & Peters attorney finds 2nd home at nonprofit

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John T. Shapiro can't stop talking about this restaurant on Lake Street. It's special to him for a lot of reasons, including the place where his family held his mother's 80th birthday party.

"It's casual but beautiful with very high ceilings and sort of has a warehousey feel with some exposed bricks and these windows — soundproofed against the L but, you can see juxtaposed against the L tracks, Garfield Park beyond it," Shapiro said.

"So it's really beautiful and sort of a peaceful oasis in which to have really good food."

Shapiro — a partner at Freeborn & Peters LLP in the litigation practice group and a member of their food industry team — remembers when the Inspiration Kitchens restaurant in Garfield Park was a dilapidated, abandoned warehouse.

That's because he serves as the general counsel for Inspiration Corp., a nonprofit which helps the homeless and those in poverty with employment training and placement, social services and housing. The organization's goal is to provide a range of services to equip individuals and families with the tools they need to live self-sufficient and stable lives.

Shapiro originally started as a board member with The Employment Project, a nonprofit that was focused on employment training, career counseling and job placement for homeless and low-income individuals.

The organization merged with the Inspiration Corp. in 2005, which is when Shapiro became general counsel. As an attorney, he provided pro bono help with the merger-related documents and contracts.

Shapiro has a unique role because he isn't on staff with Inspiration Corp. and provides all of his services to them pro

bono. He serves also as a nonvoting member on the nonprofit's board.

"Part of the fun for me is wearing an actual general counsel hat as opposed to being perhaps the outside attorney who provides services. And I'm a little bit of both in reality where I have a hybrid position," Shapiro said.

He said he has been fortunate that Freeborn & Peters has allowed him to serve in this dual capacity and that the firm really considers Inspiration Corp. one of its clients. Shapiro said many of his colleagues have generously given pro bono support, especially when Inspiration Corp. purchased and renovated the Inspiration Kitchens facility in Garfield Park.

"There is a situation where my colleagues really stepped up to help in that project," he said.

When he saw the building for the first time, Shapiro recalls seeing a giant hole in one part of the roof with sunlight streaming in.

While Shapiro handled a lot of the contracts with the architects and general contractors, fellow attorneys at Freeborn & Peters offered their expertise with real estate and zoning issues and environmental remediation.

Inspiration Kitchens has two locations, Garfield Park and Uptown, where participants in Inspiration Corp.'s culinary arts program run restaurants that are open to the public. Shapiro said the program teaches participants skills needed to be successful in the food industry such as hygiene, knife usage, food sanitation and safety, food preparation and how to be part of a culinary team.

The Garfield Park facility also has a sustainable garden on its property and runs a catering business. It recently won the 2013 Rudy Bruner Award for Excellence, which recognizes innovative urban spaces that contribute to a community's



John T. Shapiro

social and economic well-being.

"The food is really good at both restaurants. It's a pleasant dining experience. What makes it even better is knowing that you're providing an opportunity to people to learn the culinary aspect," he said.

The restaurant and catering business have given Shapiro a chance to do some social enterprise work. Social enterprises operate as businesses to generate money to support specific social services or causes. Shapiro said it's allowed him to think creatively about solutions to serve all stakeholders.

"There's a finite amount of resources and we're always trying to get more and the funders are terrific. But how do you, within this realm, provide additional services to our existing participants and reaching out to those who may unfortunately be in need. There's an entrepreneur's element to this that I very much enjoy," he said.

Because the Inspiration Corp. offers a wide range of services, the variety of legal issues Shapiro handles are a little different every day. From human resources to residential property management and food industry issues, he is continuously learning and growing from the experience professionally.

"As a lawyer it allows me to have a more well-rounded practice. I get to do things that I typically wouldn't do such as the real estate-related deals," he said.

Shannon K. Stewart, executive director and CEO of Inspiration Corp., said Shapiro is the type of person every nonprofit wants on its board. Stewart said he isn't shy about doing whatever he can to help and his connections have helped the organization get many in-kind services and donations.

Along with the pro bono legal services from Freeborn & Peters, Stewart said the law firm sponsored an advertisement for Inspiration Kitchens' restaurants and catering business. Shapiro has also hosted networking luncheons at Inspiration Kitchens and has recruited friends to attend fundraisers.

"He has energy at all levels and never gives up," Stewart said.

The organization has taken on many large projects, Stewart said, some of which have lasted for years. Stewart said she knows she can always count on Shapiro to be thorough and persevere.

"I can't emphasize how committed he is to our mission," Stewart said. "It's incredible and I think he has a humongous heart."

Inspiration Corp. board member Charles Young said Shapiro is friendly and wonderful to work with. Board member Antonette Hernandez said Shapiro brings a lot of innovative ideas to the board.

"He's great, he really is. We would be lost without him," she said.

Shapiro said it's an honor to serve as general counsel for Inspiration Corp. and that he is constantly inspired by its participants.

"They're remarkable people who have remarkable stories and face tremendous obstacles that many of us are fortunate never to have to face," he said.