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PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

'I would do it again in a heartbeat': After defending Trump, van der Veen seeks more high-profile cases



Michael van der Veen of van der Veen O'Neill Hartshorn & Levin.

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By Jeff Blumenthal
Reporter, Philadelphia Business Journal
Feb 25, 2021, 6:24pm EST

Michael van der Veen was known primarily for handling plaintiff personal injury and criminal defense matters before rising to national prominence when he represented former President Donald Trump in his second impeachment trial earlier this month. And after a brief vacation in Maine to recharge his batteries, the Center City lawyer is ready to pick up where he left off with little fanfare.

“We were busy when we took the case and we’re still busy now,” van der Veen said in a Thursday interview. “We have received an increase in new business litigation but not much else has changed.”

While helping secure Trump's acquittal is clearly a big feather in the cap of nine-lawyer van der Veen O'Neill Hartshorn & Levin, the firm will continue to represent its mix of personal injury plaintiffs, criminal defendants and various parties in business disputes.

"The way my practice is divided up is exactly the way I like it," van der Veen said. "I find it intellectually stimulating. And we have a slow growth process here and I don't want that to change either."

In addition to its Center City office at 1219 Spruce St., van der Veen O'Neill has a location in Allentown. It plans to open another in Reading but that was in the works before the Trump case and is designed to quench the demand of existing clients there.

More importantly, while he wants to handle the same type of work, van der Veen would like to take on more high-profile cases, certainly not shying away from controversial clients such as Trump.

"I think you will see us hopefully tackle more hot button issues," van der Veen said. "I want to do things that are going to move the needle."

Getting back to the normal rhythm of his life, van der Veen said he has been approached about the idea of perhaps running for elected office or writing a book about his impeachment experience.

"I'm not going to do the former but perhaps the latter," he said.

The website for van der Veen O'Neill Hartshorn & Levin, located at 1219 Spruce St., features the slogan "the V is for victory" - and van der Veen certainly has had his fair share of those.

In Philadelphia, he is perhaps best known for his plaintiffs personal injury work, securing multiple seven-figure verdicts and settlements, including \$31.5 million for a motorcyclist injured in a crash, \$10 million for a child run

over by a tractor-trailer, \$10 million for an injured bicyclist, \$4.25 million for a man hurt in a trucking accident, and \$3.25 million for a nurse hurt by a dump truck.

But he's also handled antitrust matters, a product defect suit against a toy manufacturer, a case of corporate embezzlement, and a suit seeking to legalize the use of clean hypodermic needles to combat the spread of HIV/AIDS. When it comes to the criminal defense side of his practice, van der Veen has represented some controversial figures, such as accused rapists and murderers. But certainly he has never had a client with the notoriety of Trump, who generates tremendous passion from both supporters and detractors.

The Trump case came through former Montgomery County District Attorney and County Commissioner [Bruce Castor](#), who joined van der Veen O'Neill only weeks before the U.S. House of Representatives adopted one article of impeachment against Trump. The president was charged with incitement of insurrection for the Jan. 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol that many say he ignited with a speech earlier that day and by falsely claiming for months that the November presidential election was stolen from him. Van der Veen said Castor was contacted almost immediately after that and agreed to help lead the case with Alabama lawyer [David Schoen](#).

Castor and van der Veen had eight days to assemble a team that included one of their firm associates, [Julianne Bateman](#), and Philadelphia criminal defense lawyer [Bill Brennan](#).

Asked if he had any reservations about taking on the case being that he does not have a reputation as a constitutional lawyer, van der Veen rejected the premise.

"I've been practicing for 33 years and most of that time I have been defending the 4th, 5th and 6th amendments," van der Veen said. "We as trial lawyers defend the Constitution every day."

Van der Veen said the first thing he did was listen to Trump's remarks on the Ellipse on Jan. 6, urging his supporters to march on the Capitol as Congress was certifying the results of November's presidential election. Then he and Castor quickly put together a team to handle different aspects of representing the former president.

"I just approached it like any other case," van der Veen said. "And I think we all worked well together. We got along for the most part and communicated well under a tight deadline."

There was a point in time, though, where Schoen reportedly threatened to quit in the middle of the trial.

"There was some anxiety at the end, but it was short-lived," van der Veen said.

Van der Veen is not a MAGA hat-wearing Trump supporter. He is a registered Republican but admits he disagrees with the former president on a number of issues. In fact, van der Veen filed a lawsuit against Trump last year accusing him of making repeated claims that mail voting is "ripe with fraud" despite having "no evidence in support of these claims."

Less than a year after suing Trump, he was charged with defending the former president's conduct, which included efforts to overturn the results of the election – culminating with the aforementioned speech.

"My politics were not relevant to my representation of him," van der Veen said. "I just saw myself as defending the Constitution. I have represented a lot of unpopular people in my career. But this is not a popularity contest."

There were reports that Trump was none too pleased with Castor's much-maligned opening statement at the trial. Van der Veen said he did not have that much direct contact with Trump.

"I didn't have to deal with him too much," van der Veen said. "He had representatives there communicating with

him every day. When I did speak with him, he never asked us to change our arguments. ... He didn't really critique us. And at the end, he was elated."

With Schoen unable to present due to the Jewish sabbath, van der Veen took center stage at the impeachment trial. The outcome of the case was never in doubt, as Democrats knew they would have a hard time convincing 17 Republicans to vote their way and provide the two-thirds majority needed to impeach the former president. In the end, only seven did and the Senate voted 57-43 to convict Trump of inciting insurrection – 10 votes short of the required threshold.

Van der Veen received criticism for some of his arguments, locked horns with some media members and was later lampooned on Saturday Night Live by comedian Pete Davidson. Adding to that, when van der Veen returned to his Chester County home, it was vandalized with graffiti – the word “traitor” was painted in red at the front of the driveway. He also resigned from the Philadelphia Trial Lawyers Association, where he was a board member, after some members expressed their discontent over his representation of Trump. Van der Veen would only say, “I was asked to resign and I resigned. Beyond that, I have no comment.”

“I will say that since I got back from Washington, I must have had 25,000 emails and nine out of 10 are positive,” van der Veen said. “I haven't had any lawyers call me directly to voice any complaint.”

Asked if he would change anything about the experience, van der Veen said he would have turned down more interview requests.

“It was a really positive experience for me,” van der Veen said. “I loved the challenge. I would do it again in a heartbeat.”

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