

# Paul Maher

Words: Marco Cillario; Portrait: Juan Trujillo

**I grew up in North West London.** My parents came from working-class, Irish Catholic backgrounds from Liverpool. Nobody had been to university. My mum left school at 14 but she was always keen on education.

**I did law at Bristol University.** It was in the pre-Thatcher days and I was lucky enough to be sent to university by the 'Socialist Republic of Brent'. They paid for everything.

**I used to say I was going to be a musician.** I played guitar in a band. Went through the punk period and the New Wave period. We would play in pubs and clubs, usually when there was nobody there. At one point I was even telling people I was going to become a Robert Fisk type – a journalist in war-torn places.

**Law firms used to come along in your second year** at university to interview you. I got rejected by a bunch but ended up with two offers. I did my training contract with Boodle Hatfield and turned down someone like Herbert Smith – I honestly can't remember – not knowing it was a much more prestigious firm. I accepted my training contract not having any intention of becoming a lawyer.

**I was very lucky I was seconded in my articles to ICI [Imperial Chemical Industries],** which was at the time the bellwether of British industry. They offered me a job soon after I qualified. I was an in-house lawyer from 1984 to 1990. That's when I came to like the job.

**It was when John Harvey-Jones ran the company.** Really good fun. I had great mentors: Steve Williams, who hired me, who went on to become the general counsel of Unilever; Andrew Graham was another; Ian Elder; and particularly Michael Herlihy; I worked a lot with Andy Ransom, who is now chief executive of Rentokil.

**I travelled a huge amount for someone in their mid-20s** to early-30s because of what the company was doing. Very early I was exposed a lot to the New York approach to dealmaking. Some interesting characters who would call you the kind of names people would call each other all the time where I come from but you don't normally hear in meeting rooms. A good education.

**I remember this external lawyer** – a partner at Davis Polk – we were about to go into this negotiation. He punched me on the arm and said: 'Remember, kid, you don't pay lawyers to be nice.' Boy, did he fulfil that prophecy! He was horrible! Such an eye opener. I realised negotiation and deal-doing were something I enjoyed.

**Big Bang had happened and things** were changing. I remember thinking: 'I'll go into private practice, do a couple of years and then come back as a general counsel.'

**I moved to Rowe & Maw** as a six-year qualified associate. My first day I phoned my mum and said: 'I've made the biggest mistake of my life!' It was alien and seemed a loss of status. But to say a first impression can be totally

deceptive would be an understatement. I loved my time there. I worked with two incredibly good lawyers: Mandy Warnford-Davis and Charles Ashcroft, who went on to become the GC of EMI. Incredibly clever and interesting people.

**I ended up being the senior partner.** It was unusual since – as I exclusively revealed to them on the day they made me senior partner – they had rejected me for articles. What goes around comes around.

**I once had this very tough deal.** The clients didn't like each other, the lawyers didn't like each other. The lead negotiator on the other side went out of his way to wind me up, phoning the chief executive I was acting for to say that if only they could get me out of the room the deal would be done.

**This guy says: 'Paul, any guy that can make a partner at a US firm cry is on my team! I've got these deals I want you to do.'**



**A year later, my phone rings and it is this guy.** He had moved on to be head of M&A at a big multinational and said [*imitates American accent*]: ‘Paul, any guy that can make a partner at a US firm cry is on my team! I’ve got these deals I want you to do.’ Being an utter hypocrite, I said: ‘Great to hear from you! Yes!’ He became my client for years. Being horrible was just his modus operandi. We became big friends.

**I led the merger negotiations with Mayer Brown.** I got a call from Jeff Gordon, general counsel of Marconi. He said: ‘Would you meet the chairman of Mayer Brown [Ty Fahner] and just have a chat?’ I was sure I was going to give him the we-would-like-to-stay-independent answer. There’s a theme in the things I am saying: it’s always the opposite of what I think I am going to do.

**I had coffee with Fahner and I liked him!** He was a Ronald Reagan type: very optimistic, funny, sometimes a bit difficult to follow. In a couple of hours he convinced me it would be worth having serious discussions.

**You can have a desktop analysis** of how it makes sense for the clients, the synergies, access to the US market... but in the end it’s chemistry: do you get on with these people? Can you see yourself working with them?

**I don’t know if Rowe & Maw was more entrepreneurial.** We were brasher, we were younger. Our business was going in the right direction. We had a plan. Mayer Brown was a more established name, more conservative.

**I felt very strongly about what I thought I had achieved** at Mayer Brown and didn’t feel comfortable with what I thought was going to be the next stage of the development of that firm. So I had a gap: allegedly on sabbatical, basically gone. I was thinking about doing other things. Maybe starting my own firm with private equity money.

**I was even interviewed for the role of chief executive of Liverpool Football Club,** which is my team. They must have had absolutely no-one else! I thought: ‘Why would anyone want a North Londoner telling a bunch of Scousers what to do? I’d last five seconds in the job.’

**I met Richard Rosenbaum, chair of Greenberg Traurig,** and within a couple of hours he persuaded me to join. It was a clever pitch. He said: ‘I know you’ve got other offers. But no-one knows who we are in London. You are better known than we are!’ Very flattering. I said: ‘That’s not true.’ But he said: ‘I am serious. I want to call it Greenberg Traurig Maher! You can build it the way you want it.’ I said: ‘I’ll have to think this through and come up with a business plan if I am going to do this.’ He said: ‘No, you don’t. You already know what you want to do.’

**Starting Greenberg Traurig Maher was daunting.** 2007 was the worst possible time to start a law firm. In three years we went from three to 73

then down to 59. We made any mistake it was possible to make, but we have been pretty lucky. Clients who have followed us and stayed with us have been absolutely amazing. The firm has produced a lot of relationships.

**I knew Greenberg was a hard work, result-oriented firm.** I didn’t mind. I try to take people as they come. And it is not that tough a place in my experience. I am surrounded by people who have worked with me for more than 20 years. Culture is an overused word, but being in an environment where it is rewarding to work with people is very important.

**Someone once described me as a conviction lawyer.** At some level that’s accurate. It’s about treating people with respect. I grew up in the ’60s and ’70s in a very ethnically-diverse part of London and that’s stood me in good stead. I don’t discriminate against people on the basis of education or seniority.

**In the London law firm environment there is still a snobbery** about certain firms and people. Elements of that are just cartoonish. It irritates me. Great firms don’t have universally great people – the so-called bad firms don’t have all rubbish people.

**I’d be a liar if I said it wasn’t good to have a firm with my name.** Dropping it was an evolution. It was my decision; no-one forced it on me. The GTM brand was getting too differentiated in its own

right and that’s not necessarily a good thing when you are trying to sell your services across the world.

**I like a lot of the people at [legacy] Berwin Leighton Paisner.** I like Lisa Mayhew, who I got to know in the merger negotiations [in 2016], Robert MacGregor, Chris de Pury. We were attracted to the prospect because it would have made business sense – the chemistry was good. In the end it would have been too big a merger. We have never done a merger.

**Richard felt he had to set the record straight,** and said what he thought was a fair and accurate reflection of why things had ceased. He is a straight-talking guy. But I don’t think anything he said was meant to be personal or disparaging. I’ve still got very good relations with Lisa. She’s not upset with me.

**There is a distinction between leadership and management.** I have always been interested in leadership as opposed to management. I don’t want to stop practising because that’s the bit I enjoy the most. I’ve never ever gone down below 50% client work.

**I get irritated when non-lawyers on the other side of the table** are very rude and think because you are the lawyer it is appropriate to treat you like shit. You have to suck it up sometimes, but I am clearly not good at doing that.

**I am almost 59. I have no idea what I am doing next.** I still like being a practising lawyer. I don’t have any ambition to stop.

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*Paul Maher is vice chair of Greenberg Traurig*

