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Cartoonist-Lawyer Draws on Love of the Art

Attorney Knows Legal Aspects of Comics, Finds Humor in the Law

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SAN DIEGO — Stuart M. Rees lives in a cartoon world.

The honors graduate of Harvard Law School has 100 cartoonist clients, among them some of the nation's most widely syndicated comic-strip artists.

Rees is also a cartoonist himself with a reputation that is growing in legal circles for his funny lawyer drawings that provoke laughs without resorting to acidic attacks.

"Lots of people do lawyer jokes, but I do jokes for lawyers," he said.

One easy target Rees exploited in a recent cartoon centered on the greed of business lawyers in an Enron-tainted world.

The cartoon shows two men seated in a posh club. One has his mouth open in horror. The other, a lawyer, is saying, "Relax. I said we're only *morally* bankrupt."

"We definitely liked them," Craig Garrett, a spokesman for Washington, D.C.-based Equal Justice Works, said of cartoons his nonprofit legal group ran in a recent publication.

Rees moved to San Diego in 1998, drawn to the area by a friend. He opened his own law practice and quickly found a niche catering to cartoonist clients happy to have one of their own helping with law tasks.

Steve McGarry, the creator of the internationally distributed comics "Badlands," "Pop Culture" and "Kid City," is one of Rees' clients.

"Everybody speaks highly of him," McGarry said about Rees' legal work. "He knows how far he can stray from the boilerplate deal. He's affordable even to the novice in the business, but he represents some of the best cartoonists, too."

McGarry, who is president of the National Cartoonists Society, said Rees' cartoon work is



ROBERT LEVINS / Daily Journal

Stuart M. Rees, above, is having such success with his self-taught cartooning skills that he spends two-thirds of his time cartooning and a third practicing law. He says he's the only lawyer focusing on representing cartoonists.

definitely not run-of-the-mill anti-lawyer humor.

"He seems like the only one who's not attacking lawyers," McGarry said.

Daryl Cagle, an editorial cartoonist for Slate.com, the Microsoft Network magazine, said Rees' appreciation of cartoons and the people who create them make him especially effective as a lawyer.

In fact, Rees is having so much success with his self-taught cartooning skills that he spends two-thirds of his time cartooning and only a third practicing law.

His office isn't bad, either: poolside at his home when the weather is nice and inside when it's not.

Of his clients, who constitute 40 percent of the nation's 250 syndicated cartoonists, a handful live in San Diego County, and the syndicates themselves are scattered from New York to Los Angeles.

"My entire law practice is by phone, fax and e-mail," Rees said.

Rees, 33, is the son of a Navy aviator. His first years were spent in Pensacola, Fla., and the San Francisco area. In 1979, the family moved to Andover, Mass., where he attended Phillips Academy, known for its academic rigor and the legions of prominent alumni, including President George W. Bush and his brother, Jeb Bush, the governor of Florida.

From Andover, Rees went to the University of California, Berkeley, where he graduated with honors after carrying a double major in economics and political science.

"I got serious very young," Rees said.

He worked two years as a financial analyst for AEW Capital Management in Boston before deciding to balance his business savvy with the law. In 1997, he graduated cum laude from Harvard Law School and became an associate with Bingham Dana in Boston.

But his life was changing. In law school, he had drawn his first cartoons for the student newspaper, the Harvard Law Record.

"They weren't of publishable quality, but they were a first step," he said.

He carried over that interest into his third-year thesis, a 110-page analysis of cartoonists' contracts. It was the first academic examination of the subject. He posted it on the Internet.

"People found it very helpful," Rees said.

The National Cartoonists Society, now one of his clients, invited him to speak at its next conference. Soon, cartoonists were flocking to him for advice about copyrights, trademarks and contract negotiations, the only legal issues he deals with.

He describes his niche as "a small world within entertainment law."

"One of the things my clients value most is that, when they call, I can immediately give them information. I'm familiar with the business side. And I know the artistic process," Rees said. "In the past, they'd call their lawyer and spend a couple of hours just bringing him up to speed."

If a litigation issue arises, Rees refers the client to another lawyer. For incorporation and other routine business matters, Rees suggests consulting a lawyer who practices in the area where the client lives.

"I only do what I feel nobody else can do, or wants to do," Rees said. "There are no other lawyers who do what I do."

Rees said he tries to match the needs of his clients with the payment, length of the contract and licensing deals that will work best for them.

An example: Two years ago, Dale Coverly, creator of "Speed Bump," had a contract coming up for renewal after seven years with Creators Syndicate, the only major syndicate on the West Coast. But the nation was in a recession. And, although "Speed Bump" had been one of the most successful new comics of the 1990s, newspapers tend to drop older strips to make room for new ones, Rees said.

Rees and Creators Syndicate agreed to give the syndicate incentives for selling Coverly's work to new markets. Since then, Coverly has added eight major markets and several secondary ones, Rees said.

"Success tends to breed success in the entertainment industry," Rees said.

Another example: Dan Piraro, creator of "Bizarro," wanted to be sure that he could provide his work without charge to charitable organizations. He also wanted freedom to continue his "Bizarro Bologna Show," a one-man show that received a glowing review in *The New York Times*.

"It was critical that he retain the right to do what he wanted," Rees said, so Piraro's freedom was written into his new contract.



Courtesy Stuart M. Rees

"Lots of people do lawyer jokes, but I do jokes for lawyers," Stuart M. Rees said. Above are some of his comics, which poke fun without being vicious.

Rees said he tries to resolve issues before they become problems.

In the middle of last year, he began to get serious about cartooning, he said, and six months later, he began to believe in his ability as a cartoonist.

"The writing came easy," Rees said. But the drawing didn't, and he said he is still trying to master the art.

"I hope to refine my drawing over the years," he said.

He won't abandon the practice of law, although the market for his work is expanding, he said.

"I may have to put the brakes on new

cartooning assignments to keep things in balance," Rees said.

Rees sees cartooning as an outlet for his artistic drive.

"As a lawyer, I live in the analytic world," he said, "but there's a certain pull to the creative side."

Is his cartooning profitable? Rees said he makes half the hourly rate he charges as a lawyer, getting between \$50 for a single use by a state organization and \$250 for placement in a major publication.

"I'm not making law-firm money yet as a cartoonist, but it's going well," he said.