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Two Washington state attorneys, once adversaries, are now colleagues

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Rick White joining law firm Lee & Hayes was a move nearly two decades in the making.

In the late 1980s, White worked for Seattle law firm Perkins Coie and Shaun Cross worked at Spokane's largest law firm, Paine Hamblen. Both specialized in corporate bankruptcies, or, as Cross dubs them, "financial Chernobyls."

The two first met as adversaries in 1989. Cross represented a debtor, and White represented that company's largest creditor, a real estate subsidiary of Bank of America.

But the two lawyers were able to negotiate a settlement that both say saved their clients time and legal fees.

"Not everybody in that particular field is easy to get along with," White said. "Most of them just like to fight."

A few years later they crossed paths again. When a Spokane-based technology company went through a corporate reorganization, Cross and White competed for the firm's business.

The company couldn't choose between the two attorneys and decided to hire both.

For a year and a half, Cross and White worked together, and conducted business in some unusual locales. They both took their families on vacations at Priest Lake, Idaho, and the two lawyers met early in the morning over breakfasts of river trout and huckleberry pie.

Not long after that, White made a successful run for Congress. Cross watched as White became a prominent player on tech issues in the U.S. House of Representatives.

After White lost his seat to Jay Inslee in 1998, he became CEO of TechNet, a tech industry lobbying group.

But Cross, inspired by White, took his own run at Congress. Cross actually ended up hiring White's former campaign manager, but in the end he lost the Republican primary to then-state Rep. Cathy McMorris.

"I've been a bad influence on him," White said. "His wife probably thinks it's all my fault."

Cross took on one more big case for Paine Hamblen: the bankruptcy of the Catholic Diocese of Spokane after more than 150 sexual abuse claims were filed.

With that case completed, Cross was ready to make a change. That's when he started talking to Lewis Lee, co-founder of Lee & Hayes.

Lee & Hayes started out as a small firm doing patent work for Microsoft. The firm now prepares and files patents for some of the biggest companies in the country. It represents six of the 20 largest patent holders in the United States.

Cross was drawn by the different look and feel of the firm.

"It has more the feel of a tech startup than a law firm," Cross said. "People wear jeans."

He joined Lee & Hayes, but before he started, he suggested that the firm might want to try to hire White.

A few months later, Cross introduced White to Lewis Lee. The three spent several hours together at the Fairmont Olympic Hotel in Seattle.

"From a business standpoint, it was love at first sight," Cross said. Over Cokes and peanuts, White and Lee chatted about public policy related to technology companies and patents, and people they knew in common at technology companies.

The next day, White and Cross had a follow-up lunch at the Rainier Club, then the three got together again at Lee & Hayes' Seattle office.

White visited Spokane to meet with the firm's other co-founder, Dan Hayes. White, Cross, Lee and Hayes went to dinner at Luna Restaurant in Spokane's South Hill neighborhood.

"For us it was really quite fun," Lee said. "For a little Spokane law firm to be at a state where you're attracting people like Shaun and Rick to the firm – we were a little bit like pretty excited kids, getting some validation."

White joined the firm in May. He won't practice law, but will provide advice, strategy and introductions to contacts in the tech industry. White is working about one day a week at first, but that may expand.

Lee & Hayes is planning to expand significantly, adding about 15 attorneys. It now has about 50 attorneys and patent agents. It opened an office in Austin, Texas. The Seattle office in October is moving into new digs, twice the size of its current home. White will get an office of his own in the new location.

White said he's excited about Lee & Hayes' plans, particularly with how to deal with intellectual property in the future.

"But I would never have considered it if it hadn't been for Shaun," he said.

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