

LEGAL EAGLE

One of America's top trial lawyers specializes in aviation – along with dedication, moderation, and reconciliation



Problem Solver: Aaron Podhurst is happiest when he is actively engaged with other people, helping to settle conflict.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL MCELROY

MUSING BACK on his 44-year career as a Miami trial attorney, Aaron Podhurst is outspoken about the problems of his city, country and calling.

Trial lawyers “have done a bad job as a group about controlling the ambulance chasers,” Podhurst admits. “But on the other hand, we’ve gotten an unfair rap; lawyers are also out front on controlling abuses and protecting rights in society.” And on the state and national political scenes “there’s a terrible lack of respect that’s not good for the country.”

But the head of the Miami power firm of Podhurst Orseck PA remains guardedly optimistic about many of today’s woes, refusing to succumb to the hyperbole expressed by others in his field.

In fact, Podhurst, a rangy 6’2” and as vigorous-seeming as someone half his age (he turns 70 in April), comes across as a calming breeze from the past – a gentlemanly, old-school Jewish liberal dedicated to the best traditions of the law.

Furthermore, this longtime Miamian proclaims himself an enthusiastic and unabashed local booster. After growing up in the Catskill Mountains and obtaining a law degree at Columbia University, Podhurst and his wife Dorothy moved to South Florida in the early 60s.

The boutique law firm he founded was barely a half-decade old when it landed on

the national map and started forging a distinctive identity by winning a bevy of lawsuits arising from the 1972 crash of Eastern Airlines flight 401 in the Everglades. Since then, Podhurst Orseck has strived to keep its size small (currently eight partners and 50 employees) and standards high. Along the way, it has become especially known for its pro bono work and expertise in not only airline accidents, but a range of personal injury and product liability cases such as the 2003 suits against Ford Motor Co. and Bridgestone/Firestone over a series of SUV tire blowouts. He claims no plans to retire – “I’m still enjoying it.”

Podhurst is also well regarded in most of Miami’s Cuban community, with

which he has become more involved in the past decade – largely as a result of his firm’s air-disaster practice. Asked to represent families who lost members in the Cuban regime’s notorious 1996 shoot down over international waters of two small planes from the Cuban exile group Brothers to the Rescue, he and partner Victor Díaz broke new international legal ground and managed to collect \$18 million from Cuban government funds frozen by Washington since 1961.

Not long afterward he was asked to mediate in the highly emotional standoff between the Feds and the Miami relatives of rafter boy Elián González – an effort cut short by the late-night seizure of the lad and his subsequent return to his father in Matanzas province.

The Elián episode points to a key component of what makes Aaron Podhurst tick. In his words, “I would like to be remembered as someone who gave something back to the community and helped

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make it more peaceful, aiding communication,” whether mediating amid a maelstrom, acting as pro bono counsel to the rebuilding effort after Hurricane Andrew, or serving on the board of Miami Art Museum and in various capacities (including president) of the Greater Miami United Jewish Federation.

The GMUJF’s longtime head of operations, Jacob Solomon, points out “Aaron in the Torah was known as a peacemaker, and our Aaron is never happier than when he is actively en-

gaged with other people, helping to solve problems. He knows how to be tough when he needs to, but mostly he’s incredibly persuasive.”

A favorite Podhurst mantra, says Solomon, is a rueful rendition of the old saw, “no good deed goes unpunished.” Yet, he adds, “no matter how frustrating and disappointing community service sometimes can be, Aaron Podhurst is one of those people who goes out of his way to put himself in harm’s way so he can make a difference.” **m**