

Beyond The Law: Richard Bryant

Interview by Daniel J. Murphy
Photos courtesy of Joe S. Murphy

Richard “Nick” Bryant lifts a wooden beehive frame toward the sky, causing different parts of the honeycomb to light up in the sun. He explains that the contrasting hues of honey are the result of different flower nectars being deposited by honeybees into the comb’s cells. At the end of the season, the different varieties will be harvested into a single blend of wildflower honey and will provide a link to the long-gone days of summer. Although some of the rewards of beekeeping are obvious, Bryant’s pastime also has captured his imagination, providing a window into the world of these social creatures, which toil in unison in the service of their colony. Bryant, who otherwise maintains a law practice centered on business and health care law at Van Meer & Belanger in Portland, sat down with the *Maine Bar Journal* to discuss his interests.





MBJ: Could you tell our readers about your interest in beekeeping?

RB: About 12 years ago, I was looking for something new to do for a hobby so I took a course in beekeeping at the County Extension Service. I began with a single backyard hive. I found it fascinating and really fun, so I began expanding my involvement in beekeeping. Now, I have about a dozen or so hives, mostly in backyards or in meadows throughout Cape Elizabeth, where I live.

MBJ: How much honey can you expect a single hive to generate?

RB: It really varies by the year and is directly tied to the weather. Weather affects the honey flows, which occur when bees take nectar and turn it into honey. When one or more major sources of nectar are in bloom, and the

weather is favorable to bees flying and collecting that nectar, then usually you can expect a fair amount of honey. On a good year, a single hive can produce three or four “supers.” These are the boxes that are set on top of the hive that the bees fill up with surplus honey. Each super generally runs between about 30-40 pounds of honey. That’s a pretty substantial harvest. Other years, however, if you have a weak hive or the weather doesn’t cooperate, you may have some hives that don’t really produce much surplus at all, so you don’t even get a full super out of them. It all depends on the weather and what’s going on with the crops.

MBJ: Please describe the process involved with beekeeping and making honey.

RB: The great part about it is that the bees do all the work, so I don’t make honey at all. I just harvest what they

produce by using an extractor. Essentially, an extractor is a metal cage inside a stainless steel drum in which the frames that contain the honeycomb are placed and then spun. Like other backyard beekeepers, I use a hand-turned extractor, though there are more expensive models that have electric motors. Through a centrifuge-like effect, the honey is thrown out from the honeycomb and collects in the stainless steel drum. The honey then gets filtered and bottled.

MBJ: How do different flowers affect the character of honey?

RB: The honey’s flavor is really determined by the nectar that the bees harvest when they’re out pollinating flowers. If you wanted to, you could set your hives in the middle of a blueberry barren, and you will get blueberry-flavored honey. It has a distinct flavor.

If you're down south and put your hives in the middle of a large orange orchard, you will get an orange blossom honey. The honey that I harvest is not tied to a specific type of flower. We call it a wildflower honey because the bees travel within a 3-mile radius from their hive and they collect whatever pollen happens to be available. In most cases, we get two honey flows a year, one of them in July and the other in late August. The July honey flow tends to be lighter in color and flavors. The late summer honey flow results in honey that tends to be much darker and very tangy. I'm not quite sure how to describe it, but there are a lot of goldenrod and fall asters that end up imparting a different flavor to the honey. It also can change from year to year. Some years, we have citrus flavors in our honey and no idea where they came from. There is an amazing variety of flavors and they can get very, very complex.

MBJ: What are some of the aspects that you enjoy about harvesting honey?

RB: I'm fortunate enough to have a wife who cooks a lot. She's a terrific baker and makes egg bread, challah bread, almond braid, cakes, and other things I can't resist. We have our chickens for the eggs, and my bees provide the honey for the sweetener. So I get the benefit of a lot of the goodies from what the bees produce.

MBJ: What are some of the challenges of beekeeping?

RB: These days, diseases and parasites are the foremost challenge. Backyard beekeepers like me have the luxury of being able to manage their hives without intensive chemical means. The people who are the major commercial beekeepers are essentially engaging in industrial farming. They travel about the country to follow the pollination

pattern of the crops with giant tractor-trailers that are loaded with hundreds of beehives that they set in the fields for the farmers. When the blueberries are in bloom Downeast, you're going to see lots of trucks heading up the turnpike that are each filled with hundreds and hundreds of beehives that are set out in the blueberry barrens to increase the pollination of a blueberry crop up there. But those beekeepers have bees that are under a lot of stress because they're being moved about all the time. Wherever those bees are, they are on a kind of monoculture diet. They also have higher chemical exposures because of the agricultural chemicals that are used on the crops that they are pollinating. This requires that industrial beekeepers manage their bees through more intensive use of miticides to fight mites and chemicals to prevent bacteriological infections. Hives that are the subject of that intense management sometimes become overwhelmed and





can't respond effectively to opportunistic diseases, causing the collapse of the colony.

On the other hand, there are other pests that have nothing to do with industrial farming or modern chemical use. For instance, in South Portland, a local hive recently was found to have American Foulbrood, a nasty disease that kills bee larvae and spreads when bees rob honey from weak or abandoned hives. Once evidence of that disease is found, there is no effective medicine and no alternative but to destroy the colony and burn all the infected hive equipment, so it cannot spread to other hives.

MBJ: Any interesting experiences from your time beekeeping?

RB: Yes, but they usually involve something embarrassing to me. The most recent one actually occurred last week. It has been an early year for swarming, when colonies are successful and their population really booms. The bees run out of room and reproduce by splitting the hive. Half of the bees go off with a queen to find a new place to live while the other half stays in the existing hive with another queen. When that half of the hive goes off, they usually attach themselves somewhere and form what's called a "beard," a chain of bees clinging together while scouts look for a hollow to set up a new hive. Beekeepers love this because you can get a colony of bees for free. Last week, I had three different swarms from my hives. All I had to do was shake them into a box and I would have a new colony, but unfortunately, one swarm landed high in a tree. I climbed a 20-foot ladder to try to collect them, and then realized that I had forgotten to zip up the veiled hood on my fancy new bee jacket. Then, one of the bees entered inside of my veil. It was one of those times that you stop to think of what's really important. If I get stung, I get stung. If I fall down, I may not survive. You have to laugh at yourself and feel embarrassed and stupid, but nonetheless you've got to muddle through. Thankfully, that particular bee did not sting me. He just kept me company buzzing loudly in my ear.

And now I can't put on my bee jacket without thinking about that experience as I double-check my zippers.

MBJ: Have you endured many bee stings?

RB: I have been stung many times, usually when I am not wearing gloves and not paying careful enough attention to where I am putting my fingers. In fact, at one point, a couple years after I started beekeeping, I developed a very severe allergy to honeybee venom. I went through a couple years of anti-venom therapy so that I could develop a resistance to the venom. Now, I still get stung every year, but I do not have as severe a reaction.

MBJ: Any intersection between your legal work and pastime?

RB: There actually is, a little bit. Generally, people are afraid of stinging insects. It's not so much the sting, it's just the sound that makes people react. Obviously, if they get stung, they're also going to react to that. When I became a beekeeper, I had to face up to these fears. But you learn pretty early on that nervousness imparts itself to the bees, so if you are acting as though you are afraid of getting stung, you are far more likely to be stung. Bees get defensive if they sense a threat. If you are really calm and don't exude any sense of nervousness, it's much easier to work with bees and you're much, much less likely to get stung. So I learned to ignore the buzz and remain really calm, focusing on the task at hand. That is sort of a life lesson that carries over to legal work and lots of other aspects of life: You can accomplish a lot more and have a lot less trouble if you remain calm and focused instead of reacting blindly to the buzz.

MBJ: What is the best advice that you've ever received?

RB: The best advice I can think of to pass along actually does come from my beekeeping. It has to do with the value of humility and trusting others to handle their part, which many lawyers like me sometimes struggle

with. Beekeepers whom I respect have told me: "Look, bees know far better than you do how to survive and how to make honey, because that's what they do." So the more I have learned about bees, the more I have realized that it's often better to leave them alone and let them do their work. I think that principle applies in many other circumstances, and it's always useful advice for me to harken back to when working with others: Leave them alone and let them do their work, which they know better than you do.

Beekeepers come from every walk of life and what I like about them is that the only common trait that I've found among them is that they are curious people, and that's in both senses. We all have our idiosyncrasies. But we are all also really interested in the world around us. That's a really nice subculture to be a part of because there are lots of different perspectives and everybody does it differently. It is a world rife with theories, but experience remains the best teacher because the details of the underlying natural phenomenon are just too complex to be subject to any one simple explanation. You get advice, talk to a mentor, and get some education, but at the end of the day, you end up beekeeping the way you find works best for you.



Daniel J. Murphy is a shareholder in Bernstein Shur's Litigation Practice Group, where his practice concentrates on commercial and business litigation matters.

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