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Pillsbury chair emeritus to lead national child advocacy group

By Douglas Saunders

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On Jan. 1, Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman LLP partner and chair emeritus James M. Rishwain Jr. will become national chair of the Court Appointed Special Advocate program which oversees more than 900 regional programs in 49 states and serves more than 240,000 abused and neglected foster children with approximately 100,000 volunteers.

"I have been involved in CASA since around 2004," Rishwain said. Rishwain said his inspiration to become involved with the charity was Pillsbury lawyer-turned-teacher and CASA volunteer Robert Morrison.

"Rob was an incredible cutting-edge creditors' rights attorney who represented all the major financial institutions around the country. He decided at the height of his career to leave the practice to do two things, become a CASA and to teach middle school in South Central Los Angeles," Rishwain said. "After a few years, he made the decision to rejoin the firm. I was helping to facilitate his return to the practice."

On Sept. 25, 2003, shortly before he was set to rejoin the firm, Morrison suffered a fatal heart attack.

"I was close with him and his family and admired his work and because of his devotion I became intrigued with CASA and its compelling mission. Over the years, I have been involved and engaged with our City of Los Angeles, its parks, its schools, its sports, its infrastructure and the children of our community including its foster children and I had a vision about how the city could become a better place," Rishwain said. "As I already



RISHWAIN

represented the school district, I decided to take on Rob's legacy in CASA LA." It was not long before Rishwain's life was filled with pressing other responsibilities.

"Around this same time, I became global chairman of my law firm. I was traveling throughout the country and overseas and I had a young family. A lot of things were happening in my life," he said. "And on top of all of that, my colleagues at CASA LA convinced me to join the board."

Rishwain joined the CASA-Los Angeles board at a time when it was entirely funded by public resources.

"I joined the board following the 2007 economic crisis. At that same time, I'm the chair of my firm watching five firms that are the same size and stature of my firm with over 100 years of history dissolve," he said. "The economic crisis caused CASA-LA to lose all of its public funding. Amidst all of this, I walked into the CASA LA board meeting one day and said, 'You know what we're going to do, we're going to have a gala. We're going to have

500 people show up to that gala and we're going to raise \$1 million.' You can imagine I was laughed out of the room. Literally laughed out of the room."

But Rishwain fulfilled his promise. He led the effort to hold the inaugural gala for CASA-Los Angeles, and 500 guests attended, raising \$800,000 after expenses. The organization recently held its 10th annual gala. Rishwain honored his friend by creating the Robert Morrison Community Service Award which recognizes a company or an individual who has given extraordinary service to CASA-Los Angeles. This year's event also raised roughly \$800,000.

Rishwain said he has always felt a need to help children.

"Children who are abused and neglected are our most vulnerable population, and they need someone to guide them through the legal process," he said. "I joined CASA LA because this organization represents everything I value as well as honoring my friend and partner Rob."

Children who have a CASA lawyer receive more assistance and support than children without that help, and they are more likely to be adopted or returned to their families and less likely to reenter the child welfare or juvenile criminal system, according to several studies.

Rishwain has done other work for children's charities. He was counsel to the Committee for Arts and Music, backers of Proposition 28 which mandates funding for the arts and music education programs in California public schools. The measure passed in November with nearly two-thirds of voters' support.

"This was Austin Beutner's vision and his mission. Our firm did the foundational work, forming the

Committee for Arts and Music, helping with strategy," he said. "There were so many smart and skilled people involved in this endeavor led by Austin Beutner to secure funding for arts and music in public schools."

Beutner, an investment banker, is a former superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District. Rishwain has done a lot of legal work for the school district over the years.

"The Los Angeles Unified School District is one of the largest public-school systems in the nation. It's nearly the size of Seattle," Rishwain said. "If it were a city, it would be the 15th largest city in the nation. I was engaged by the district at a time when they had only developed a handful of schools over a 20-year period of time from 1984 to 2004. From 2004 to 2010, the District developed around 100 schools. I've been proudly involved with children's issues for a long time."

Rishwain said he thought arts and music education in public schools was vital, pointing to studies that appear to show children who receive arts and music education have a better attendance record and fewer disciplinary issues."

Arts and music in public schools is critically important," Rishwain pointed out. "To come up with innovative ways to help students working their way through emotional or social issues which may be coming from the pandemic or otherwise, through sports and the arts movement is my passion."

After seeing successes in Southern California, Rishwain said he was eager to apply what he has learned on a national scale through CASA.

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