

## Executive Appointments

# Lawyer to the rich has a civil rights past still relevant today

### At Work with the FT

**William Zabel**

Founding Partner, Schulte Roth & Zabel

*Sarah Murray* talks to a legal activist who has served both poor and privileged

I have barely sat down in William Zabel's Manhattan office before he tells me he is a bit of a legal Jekyll and Hyde: "I have this whole pro-bono civil rights and human rights history. But then I have my private practice, which is basically . . . protecting the rich and allowing them to keep as much of their money as they can."

His brief for a 1967 case, which resulted in a landmark civil rights decision by the US Supreme Court effectively putting an end to race-based prohibitions on marriage, is about to be invoked again as marriage equality makes its way to the Supreme Court, this time regarding same sex marriages.

"They'll cite *Loving v Virginia* a lot," he says, referring to the earlier case. He adds he is optimistic the Supreme Court will rule in favour of same-sex marriage: "I think the decision will be 5-4."

Mr Zabel seems more demure than his reputation suggests. He has taken on some big and closely watched cases.

In 2010, he struck the \$7.2bn settlement between the US federal government and the estate of Jeffery Picower, a long-time investor with convicted fraudster Bernard Madoff. The deal — the largest individual civil settlement in US legal history — allowed Madoff's victims to be compensated.

It was as a boy that Mr Zabel first recognised the law's power. After neighbours poisoned his

## Career Clips

### How do you balance representing wealthy families and promoting civil rights?

It turns out to be very satisfying in both realms. And I've always been able to compartmentalise.

### What advice would you give a young lawyer starting out on a career?

Try to be a total master of the area of law you pick. Then you will have created a reputation and a career that allows you to use it for the public good as well as for private benefit.

### Do lawyers have a duty to work for the public good?

Duty is a strong word — but lawyers should feel an obligation to do good things in a world full of bad things.

### When you were young, did you ever consider another career?

The only other thing I was interested in was journalism. I was editor of my high school newspaper and did some writing for *The Princetonian*. But then I wanted to go to Harvard Law School and I got a scholarship.

dog, his grandfather took them to court, where they were convicted of the "felonious destruction of property" and fined. "I saw that the law really can work sometimes." It is a message that stayed with him during his studies at Harvard Law School and when he became a founding partner of Schulte Roth & Zabel. It remains with him now, as he is also chairman of Human Rights First, a US advocacy group.

Mr Zabel, who is in his 70s, has built a reputation for handling legal wrangles for the rich and famous. His clients range from billionaire investor George Soros to golfer Greg Norman. He has also

represented the wives of wealthy businessmen. However, married for more than 30 years, Mr Zabel prefers mediations to divorce suits.

"You help people solve very personal problems in privacy," he says. "And after it's over, the

relationship is more likely to continue in a civil way."

While Mr Zabel, who has three sons and many grandchildren, likes dealing with what he calls "human frictions", he is also one of the most important US civil rights champions of his generation.

As a Princeton undergraduate in 1955, he and his roommate launched a petition to bring to federal justice two white men who had been acquitted by a Mississippi jury of the murder of Emmett Till, an African-American teenager who supposedly flirted with a white woman.

The petition prompted a night visit from three armed students dressed in Ku Klux Klan outfits. The students were caught after leaving their sheets, with tell-tale holes, for the university laundry service.

In the 1960s, as a volunteer civil rights lawyer in Mississippi, members of the Ku Klux Klan shot at him and missed. Mr Zabel seems to have relished the experience: "Winston Churchill said the most exhilarating thing in life is to be shot at with no result."

But his proudest civil rights achievement was *Loving v Virginia*. Years later, after a speech he made when accepting the Robert F Kennedy Prize for advancing racial and social justice, three women of mixed race approached him. "They said they wanted to thank me because they wouldn't be alive today if their parents couldn't have married," he says. "That was priceless."



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