

What does a young man do after he has majored in political science, worked as an investigator for a prominent law firm, graduated from law school, passed a bar exam and landed a job as a hearings examiner with the Division of Motor Vehicles? For Peter Ramsey JD '88 of Manchester, NH, the answer was to start a career in the world of theater.

Naturally.

Peter Ramsey JD '88: Bringing the Performing Arts to New Hampshire's Historic Palace Theatre

"I grew up next to the Barn Playhouse in New London," says Ramsey, 55. The president and CEO of the Palace Theater Trust in Manchester recalls summer nights when, "I would hear songs from 'Oklahoma,' 'West Side Story,' all those great shows." He became hooked on the sounds and later the sights of the theater. He loved being near the stage, but not on it.

"I stuttered as a youth and I was afraid of it," he says. His on-stage career was limited to one non-speaking part, as a Munchkin in a high school production of the "The Wizard of Oz."

"I sang a song with two other guys," he remembers. The singing didn't last long, either. "I had a lousy voice."

He earned a BA at Keene State College, and then worked as an investigator for the Manchester law firm, Nixon and Brown. The principals, David Nixon and Stanley Brown, encouraged him to go to law school and he enrolled at Pierce Law. He worked part-time nights on the copy desk at the *Union Leader*. By then, he was married with a child and the money didn't go very far.

"I didn't go to Fenway Park for three years," says Ramsey, a native son of Red Sox Nation. "That's how poor I was." Not long after graduation, he passed the bar exam—in Florida.

"My dad had moved to Florida and I thought I might live down there," he recalls. He returned instead to New Hampshire and took a job as a hearings examiner with the Department of Safety in Concord. Then he and his mother, Margaret, decided to start a summer playhouse in Meredith. The Lakes Region Summer Theatre consumed his evenings and weekends until it grew to the point where he left his city job and devoted himself full-time to the playhouse.

Then in the summer of 1999, former Manchester Mayor Sylvio Dupuis, heading up a new board of trustees of the Palace Theatre, asked Ramsey if he would be interested in taking over management of the legendary downtown theater that was then coming out of bankruptcy. Ramsey took the challenge and arrived at the locked-up theater on the day after Labor Day.

"When I opened the door, I didn't even know where the lights were," he said. When he looked at the books, he found the theater trust had \$15,000 in the bank. Its debt was more than \$200,000, he said.

Today the Palace has an annual operating budget of close to \$3 million. Attendance last year was about 150,000 and more than 25,000 school children were bused in from all around the state for weekday shows, including several December performances of the ever-popular "A Christmas Carol."

Meanwhile, Ramsey, who served four terms as state representative in the 1980s, was elected to the state legislature again last year. He was an assistant soccer coach at Saint Anselm College for nearly two decades, where he has been head coach for the past four years. Somewhere along the way, he pursued a Master's degree in public administration at the University of New Hampshire, but stopped a few credits short of the degree.

"Some things in life just never get completed," he said somewhat ruefully. But he is glad he stayed the course at law school, even though he never entered the practice.

"I loved my three years there," he says. "I would recommend law school to people who want to challenge themselves. It's been incredibly helpful to me in the theater world—with contracts, with negotiation skills, with the ability to analyze a situation."

Ramsey lives in Manchester with his wife, Pat, and their three children, Catherine a senior at William and Mary, Kelsey a sophomore at University of New Hampshire, and Christian, 12, "an all-star Little Leaguer." Their dad, in addition to his role at the Palace, is very proud of his work at the Palace and to be a graduate of Franklin Pierce Law Center.

He is also pleased to be running New Hampshire's busiest theater. "I tell everyone I've got the best job in the state," Ramsey says. "I get paid to put smiles on people's faces."

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