

# Small Packages

Nine California Sole Practitioners and Boutique Practices Rank High in Their Specialties, From Business to Entertainment to Bankruptcy.

## Rus Miliband

Name any headline-grabbing, bet-the-company case in Orange County, and the 12 trial attorneys of Rus, Miliband & Smith are surely involved.

From the 1980s Lincoln Savings & Loan scandal and the county's 1996 bankruptcy to this year's downfall of First Alliance Corp., the business boutique dares to go where only big firms tread.

"We would match our success rate and problem-solving capabilities with any national firm," name partner Ron Rus says confidently.

Rus, 52, has every reason to be confident. Since starting his firm in 1992 with partners Joel Miliband and Randy Smith, the man who waited tables while in law school has had the area's top corporate leaders calling him when they're in a jam.

William Popejoy is one of them. Rus represented the high-profile financier and former Orange County chief executive officer in his lawsuit against the owners of the Balboa Bay Club. Popejoy accused the owners of renegeing on a \$73 million deal to sell him controlling interest in the waterfront property in Newport Beach. The suit settled in February for a confidential sum. *Popejoy v. Ray*, 00CC00058 (Orange County Super. Ct., filed May 31, 2000).

"He just did a masterful job," Popejoy says of Rus' performance, adding that Rus could run circles around any big firm.

"When it comes down to a case, it's the horse you have in the race, not the number in the stable," Popejoy says.

Then there's Brian Chisick, the former First Alliance chairman who has spent much of the past year embroiled in controversy.

Chisick was hit with multiple lawsuits after the dubious sales tactics of his Irvine-based mortgage lender, First Alliance, made it the subject of scathing investigative reports by ABC News and The New York Times. Suits from the Federal Trade Commission and six states, among others, soon followed, forcing the mortgage lender into bankruptcy.

Rus, along with Smith, hammered out a settlement in March in which Chisick will pay \$20 million in restitution, not too shabby considering Chisick's company allegedly defrauded 18,000 borrowers of \$217 million. (First Alliance, represented by a different firm, has agreed to pay \$40 million to the victims.)

But it's the Orange County bankruptcy for which Rus is probably best known. He obtained the release of nearly \$100 million owed to his clients, consisting of a variety of water districts and several local cities, including Newport Beach, in the nation's largest municipal bankruptcy.

While it's easy to get caught up in Rus' lucrative client roster, sun-kissed good looks and polished personality, he doesn't grab all the attention at his Newport Beach firm.

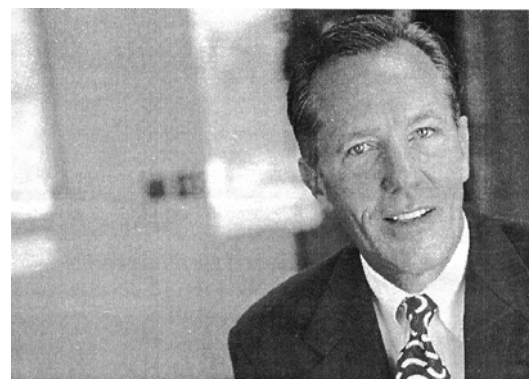
Miliband is a member of the State Bar Board of Governors and former president of the 7,000-member Orange County Bar Association; Smith is defending the world's largest automobile wholesaler against a \$41 million class action by consumers alleging

unfair business practices. *Shuster v. California Auto Dealers Exchange*, 01CC00336 (Orange County Super. Ct., filed July 18, 2001); and partner Laurel Zaeske was a primary attorney on the Lincoln Savings & Loan case, in which the firm helped win \$400 million for bondholders of the collapsed savings and loan in 1992.

It's the accomplishments of all the lawyers, according to Rus, that make Rus Miliband among the elite business litigation firms in Southern California.

"I'm surrounded by lawyers who make me look good," he proudly says.

- Tanya Vince Rothma



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Photo by Hugh Williams