

THE RECORDER

Politically Connected Firm Opens S.F. Office

By **Scott Graham**

SAN FRANCISCO — Los Angeles litigation boutique Browne George Ross is opening a San Francisco office with former U.S. Attorney Joseph Russoniello as its marquee name.

Business litigators Andrew August and Kevin Rooney of San Francisco's Pinnacle Law Group will also be joining the firm.

"The pieces just fit into place really well," said Russoniello, who led the Northern District U.S. attorney's office under President Ronald Reagan and during parts of both Bush administrations, was a longtime litigator at the Cooley firm, and did a stint as dean of San Francisco Law School.

Browne George Ross is a 10-lawyer firm that litigates high-stakes cases. "They've been around here a long time and they have a great reputation," said L.A. recruiter Valerie Fontaine of Seltzer Fontaine Beckwith. Last fall the firm made headlines by helping filmmaker Quincy Jones III win a \$2.2 million verdict against rapper Lil Wayne. The firm went through some turbulence five years ago when it merged with Dreier Stein & Kahan just before firm patriarch Marc Dreier was charged with securities fraud. The Browne George group spun back out on its own in 2009.

Browne George is also politically connected, with partner Eric George — son of the former chief justice and an informal adviser to both Republican and Democratic judicial ap-



Joseph Russoniello and Andrew August are joining Browne George Ross.

pointment authorities — playing a leading role. Russoniello now brings that type of juice to the Northern California office of a firm whose motto is "We solve problems."

To Russoniello, it's not about knowledge of people but of process. "We're in a world in which government has a greater stake in businesses' and individuals' lives," he said. "People don't really understand how it functions, particularly at the federal level. I can walk people

through that process."

Russoniello, 71, cites environmental law, health care and finance as three areas where government funding and regulation are growing, so "there's likely to be a lot of contention."

Since leaving the U.S. attorney's office in 2010, Russoniello has been doing mostly consulting work, including on a complex LCD antitrust case. He and George talked about the idea of teaming up then, and Russoniello associated in on one of their cases.

With the LCD case winding down earlier this year — and August's firm nearing the end of its lease — the timing seemed right for the tie-up.

August, 56, is a business and real estate litigator who gained renown for successfully suing The Walt Disney Co. over false advertising in its Beardstown Ladies Investment Club guides. He expects to focus on contracts and commercial litigation, corporate disputes, real estate and both consumer and securities class actions, among other things. He will be the mainstay of the office, in Russoniello's words, while Russoniello will be on hand a few days a week.

They will set up temporary offices on California Street until November then settle into the Rincon Center.

"They practice our same kind of law," Browne George partner Peter Ross said. "They put out first-rate paper, as we like to think we do, and they're not afraid to go to trial if they need to."

While he's excited to team up with Browne George, August is wistful about closing the doors of the firm he helped establish with partner

Theodore Bayer in 1990. But the Pinnacle Law Group was headed that way because of an expiring lease and the personal and professional goals of the firm's lawyers, August said.

Bayer and his property tax consulting business, Ad Valorem Solutions, will be teaming up with San Francisco's Paradigm Tax Group. Pinnacle partners Matthew Shier and Jeremy Katz are forming an insolvency and bankruptcy boutique that will be known as shierkatz.

"We said we all love each other," August said, "but what's love got to do with it?"

Browne George was founded in the 1980s by Allan Browne and Edward Woods, who's now with Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld. George joined in the early 2000s after serving as deputy legal affairs secretary to Governor Pete Wilson and as counsel to the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee. He is now the firm's managing partner.

"Throughout the firm's almost 30-year history, we have litigated and tried many cases in San Francisco and throughout Northern Califor-

nia," he said in a written statement. "With the opening of this office and with this depth of experience, we look forward to strengthening our commitment to San Francisco and its legal community."

Christopher Sullivan of Greenfield Sullivan Draa & Harrington said Russoniello's background and experience will be valuable, especially when matching up against a bigger firm with greater resources.

"He's a tremendous lawyer with an enormous amount of energy," said Sullivan, who knows Russoniello both from litigation and the executive committee of the Federal Bar Association. "His background gives him a lot of options."

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