

Professional Insights

Opinions from Business Leaders We Know and Respect

Interview with Skip Keesal



“There’s no magic involved when it comes to firm values.”

Skip Keesal

Founder and Shareholder
Keesal, Young & Logan

Your early years include time living on a ranch. What’s the backstory on that?

For parts of the winter, my family would stay at a dude ranch in Tucson, Arizona, and the cowboy in charge was a member of the Professional Rodeo Cowboy Association. At a fairly young age, I learned all about horse riding, cattle roping and bulldogging, and when I got a bit older I competed professionally for a few years in all the rodeo events, including bull and bronco riding. I participated in about 40 rodeos a year. In my final bull ride, when I was around 18 years old, the bull’s head came back and my head came down, and it was like hitting a brick wall. When I woke up, I was on the ground, hearing “Stars and Stripes” playing in the background, and I remember thinking that there’s got to be a better way to make a living.

Do you still participate in rodeo events in any capacity?

For many years, I would perform in the professional rodeo when it was in town. It was fun for the rodeo to feature a non-cowboy lawyer in events, and it was also great for me, because everyone got to see me as something other than a pansy in a white button-down collar shirt. Rodeo is the only athletic thing that I’ve ever done in my life. People think that roping a steer requires some great dexterity, but I’ve done it as many as 2,000 times and can tell you there’s really not much to it. When you think about it, the maximum time it takes to rope a steer is only about 10 or 12 seconds. So the amount of time you’re engaged, and at risk, is very brief.

With that said, I’ve had a few mishaps. One year, we took the firm’s staff to a resort near Vail that had a working ranch featuring a professional rodeo arena. Our executive director asked me if I would rope a steer for the staff, and I agreed. The owner loaned me his horse. We came stampeding out and I threw the rope and severed my bicep tendon. It was incredibly painful. Here I was in front of 55 people, and I didn’t know if the rope hit the steer or not, because all that I saw was stars. But ego is a powerful thing and I didn’t want to show them that I was hurt. So the cowboy got off his horse and handed me the rope and asked if I wanted to try again. I agreed, because I thought I had just sprained my arm. So we went again, and bingo, we roped it. People are blowing their car horns and thinking, “Look at what that pansy did,” so I did it again. Although I was in pain, I stuck around for drinks and photos before I made my way to the hospital for treatment. After an operation and 6 months of physical therapy, I was back out roping again, up until about 2 years ago.

How did you go from rodeo cowboy to lawyer?

I didn’t have any family members who were lawyers, so there was no legacy to fulfill. When I was maybe 11 or 12 years-old, somebody told me that I was a “good talker,” and that I ought to become a lawyer. At that point, I didn’t know what I was going to do for a living, and that sounded like a good idea. So here I am, all these years later, and still loving it.

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What's the toughest part about running a large law firm?

When I opened the office in Long Beach, it was just me, and I never had any aspirations at the outset to be the senior partner of a large law firm. Things just broke our way right off the bat, and each year we would hire one or two new people. But the most important thing to me is that everyone who works here has to be gracious, honest, brilliant, fun and hardworking, with the kind of people that everyone wants as their lawyer. Over the years, we've continued to be very careful about hiring people. Because we are blessed to work with people who are self-directed and truly delightful, there is really nothing for me to manage.

The firm owns real estate. We give our partners an interest in that portfolio one year after they become partners, and we don't charge them for that. We also don't charge for partnerships because our view is that after you've been here for 7 or 8 years, you've earned your partnership. Nobody wants to learn that after they've been made partner they have to pay into a capital account or borrow money, and remain in debt for another 4 or 5 years. We never thought that was fair.

Your firm promotes the importance of "simple courtesy." How do you instill that as a corporate value?

The type of people we have here – including staff, associates, partners, paralegals and of counsel attorneys – are all predisposed to be gracious and courteous. If you've gone through the

hiring process properly, the most that you can do after someone is hired is to reinforce thoughts and behaviors that are already ingrained. This is not only of benefit to the work environment here, but experience tells us that if you are the nicest person in the courtroom, and if the jury likes you because you've been a lady or a gentleman, that you are going to be more effective for clients.

There's no magic involved when it comes to firm values. You hire nice people, you tell everybody the truth, and you're completely straightforward with your clients. You do what's truly necessary, and you don't do things that are unnecessary. You may not always get it right, but you never fudge an inch. If you make a mistake you pick up the phone and you call the other guy and say, "I've made a mistake." Nobody gets mad at someone who says that they've made a mistake. Because then people know that you're a credible person.

From the hundreds of cases you've tried over the course of your career, is there one particular case that stands out?

One case that I remember well involved the fatal shooting of two police officers at a hotel. We represented the widows of the slain officers. Although we are not premises liability experts, I had a personal connection with one of the widows, and told her that we would look into the case.

We filed suit and took depositions, and 4 of the 6 people – including the security chief and owner of the building where the shooting occurred – said under oath there was no crime on that property. But we continued to dig deeper, and discovered that there had

been 149 Level 1 felonies including 13 armed robberies at the location. They had lied to us, and additionally, their attorney lied to the jury in court and was reprimanded by the judge. There after, offer settlement negotiations started at \$1 million. We eventually were able to settle for \$5 million for the two widows, who otherwise would have spent the rest of their lives working at menial jobs just to survive. It gave us great satisfaction to help those women get a fair shake, after living through such a tragedy.

What's your opinion on the discussions regarding the end of mandatory arbitration?

When arbitration first got started, which I think was in 1966, a lot of professionals in the industry understood the business and legal propositions that were being presented to them. The underlying premise was, that by using people who were experienced in the business, you would get a more equitable outcome; as opposed to a jury where people would be less likely to understand the complexities of the case.

With very few exceptions, arbitrators were doing their job fairly and correctly, and weren't favoring the plaintiffs or the brokerage firm. For many years, I thought that it was a fair forum. I won't go so far as to suggest that arbitration is not a fair forum now, but you see some really strange awards, and a bias that often seems to be in favor of the plaintiff. So I'm not as confident anymore that you'd have a more appropriate outcome with an arbitration panel, compared with a jury trial.

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You've won a lot of recognitions and awards. Do any of them have special meaning?

I don't take myself too seriously, and although I appreciate the recognition and awards, it's not what drives me. I have a lot of great people who work here with me, and a lot of fantastic clients who provide us with opportunities to do our best work. That's the recognition we all seek.

Was there anyone who's served as a source of personal inspiration in your life?

When I first started out as an attorney, I worked at a law firm that had 3 partners who were all WWII veterans, and the best trial lawyers I've ever seen. They all gave me a lot of leeway to participate in a meaningful way in important cases, which gave me self-confidence and an experience that I've always considered to be my "sea legs" in this business.

Any personal insights you'd like to share?

I have a son and two daughters. My son is a broker with Oppenheimer; he was also president of the Rotary Club, which is a big deal here. One of my daughters is a real estate broker and one works here at the firm. They are wonderful kids, and my wife is absolutely dynamite, and is patient beyond belief. She was a flight attendant for American Airlines, and flew on the inaugural flight of the 747 jumbo jet. In fact, she was the first flight attendant admitted to the American Airlines Hall of Fame. Last but not least is my wonderful grandson Jack who is making us proud in all he does. They are great people, and I am proud of them all.

Skip Keesal Biography

Samuel ("Skip") A. Keesal, Jr., was born in Chicago, Illinois, and was raised on a ranch in Tucson, Arizona. He served in the United States Army and attended the University of Arizona and California State University, Long Beach (CSULB). Skip graduated from CSULB in 1962 with a B.S. degree in business. In 1965 he received an LL.B. from the University of Southern California (USC) Law School. Skip founded the law firm of Keesal, Young & Logan in 1970 which now has offices in Long Beach, San Francisco, Seattle, Anchorage, and Hong Kong. The firm specializes across a very broad range of practice areas.

Skip has tried over 250 cases in seventeen different states, including approximately 75 jury trials. As a result of his trial practice, he has been named to the Best Lawyers in America® in Admiralty & Maritime Law, Commercial Litigation, Legal Malpractice Law (Defense), Litigation – Banking & Finance, Litigation – Environmental, Litigation – Labor & Employment, Litigation – Securities, Medical Malpractice Law (Defense), Product Liability Litigation (Defense), and Professional Malpractice Law (Defense).

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