

This lawyer spends his life toiling to keep a righteous balance between the needs of the environment and the demands of business and government

When Every Day Is Earth Day

by KATHERINE GLOVER

THE SKEPTIC

Lawrence Riff believes that junk science is no way to fight for the environment

Lawrence Riff considers himself “intimately involved in environmental law,” but he’s not on the side that makes him popular with environmentalists. He leads the toxic tort practice group at Steptoe & Johnson LLP, representing clients like ExxonMobil, Shell, Chevron and Monsanto Co.

Even friends and family ask him how he can represent big oil companies. “I’ve given the matter a lot of thought,” Riff says.

But he draws a distinction between acute exposure to chemicals and chronic exposure. “If you smoke a cigarette, you’re not going to get lung cancer from it,” he says. “If you smoke three packs a day for 30 years, you might. It’s the same concept.”

Acute exposure can truly harm people, he says, but those aren’t the cases he deals with.

“In the cases I’m involved with, someone is exposed for a long period of time to a very low dose of some chemical substance, and the claim is that that low-dose exposure has hurt them. I examine the science behind that claim.”

His scientific analysis invariably leads him to the same conclusion. On whether there are authentic cases of poisoning from chronic exposure to low doses of toxins, Riff says, “almost never, in my opinion.”

He likes the inherent tension in toxic tort cases, he says. On the one hand, jurors recognize that our modern way of life is reliant on a wide array of chemical products. On the other, people have a fundamental distrust of those products. “It’s that tension that makes the toxic tort practice in the trial court in front of juries so challenging and, frankly, exhilarating,” he says.

He says that when he begins a trial, the odds are stacked against



“All I ask,” says Riff, “is to decide based on science and not prejudice.”

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him—he’s representing major corporations against sympathetic plaintiffs who are often visibly sick.

But when the jury hears the facts, he says, they often come to a different conclusion. “All I ask of a jury—and my friends and family—is, please decide the question based on science and common sense, not prejudice.” ◀