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Meland Russin Founder Named Fla. Bankruptcy Judge

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Law360 (August 21, 2020, 2:05 PM EDT) — Miami bankruptcy attorney Peter D. Russin has been named to serve as a bankruptcy judge for the Southern District of Florida, realizing a long-held interest in public service but also making a "bittersweet" departure from the firm he co-founded 27 years ago.

Judge Russin, who was appointed by the Eleventh Circuit to fill a seat in Fort Lauderdale recently opened by the retirement of U.S. Bankruptcy Judge John K. Olson, practiced bankruptcy and commercial litigation as a shareholder at Miami-based Meland Russin & Budwick PA. The firm has said it will move forward as Meland Budwick PA.

> "After being a private practice lawyer for 32 years, the idea of public service was very attractive," Judge Russin told Law360 in an interview Thursday. "When the opportunity arose, I applied and received the appointment."

The longtime Miami Beach resident is a graduate of Tulane University and George Washington University Law School.

In his practice, he represented a variety of parties in insolvency proceedings, including corporate debtors, secured lenders, creditors committees and trustees, according to the court's announcement.

Judge Russin also has represented asset purchasers in bankruptcies, counseled clients through out-of- court workouts and private debt restructurings and served as a Florida Supreme Court-certified circuit civil mediator, the court said.

His former partner Michael Budwick, who also specializes in bankruptcy, commercial

litigation and financial fraud matters, said that the new judge's breadth of experience is just one of many attributes that should serve him well.

> "His character, his temperament, his patience, I think those are going to be very important qualities. His command of the Bankruptcy Code. His preparation," Budwick said. "As a lawyer attending court, much of it is about preparation and being ready to address any sort of issue that could possibly come up during the course of a hearing, during the course of a trial. I think he'll bring that same level of preparation, that same diligence to the bench."

Beyond Judge Russin's professional experience, his empathetic character may prove just as important in his new role, longtime friend and colleague Mark Meland said.

"We have a very sophisticated bankruptcy practice … but as a judge, you're going to be dealing with a whole gamut of bankruptcy issues. It's not all these types of cases that we're really involved in, which are the large, complicated corporate cases," Meland said. "You also deal with a family with credit card debt and small matters. I think he's going to be kind and considerate to everyone who appears in front of him. He's going be interested in the cases that maybe aren't the giant newsworthy cases."

Although he had long thought about public service, Judge Russin said it was a "very, very gut-wrenching decision" to leave his firm, and especially Meland, with whom he started the business as a two-lawyer boutique.

But Judge Russin said it helped knowing that the firm has had success and is continuing to grow, along with having the support of his partners and his family.

"It made leaving more comfortable because the firm has a wonderful, bright future," Judge Russin said. "I was able to do it, with some degree of trepidation, but their support made it a lot easier."

Public service has always been an important part of the firm's culture, Meland and Budwick said, noting that every one of eight current partners has had a leadership position in a community organization, including multiple members who have served as president of the Bankruptcy Bar Association of the Southern District of Florida

and others who serve as board members for schools, religious institutions, activist groups and charities.

“It’s important as to how we see ourselves within the community, and I think that he’s at a stage in his career where he was ready for a new challenge and I think that this is his way of really showing his commitment to public service, and we applaud him for doing it,” Meland said of Judge Russin.

It is bittersweet to move forward without their longtime partner, Meland and Budwick said, especially during what they described as a “super exciting” time for the firm, which has added five attorneys, including one partner, this year and is focused on growing its financial fraud and insolvency practices during these challenging times.

“One thing I’m very proud about, and I think Michael’s very proud about, is that we built this firm that can continue to thrive and excel and grow even if a longtime partner leaves the firm,” Meland said. “I feel like we helped — it’s his abilities and all of that — but we certainly helped him achieve a dream. And that feels pretty darn good.”

–Editing Abbie Sarfo.