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ENGINEERING MINNESOTA

A man with a beard, wearing a yellow hard hat and a dark suit over a white shirt, is looking down at a tablet computer. He is standing on a rooftop with rows of blue solar panels in the background under a clear blue sky.

**Where
Are
All The
Engineers
Going?**

**Updating
The Local
Job Market**

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ENGINEERS AND THE LAW

Darren Hepper: Would-be Musician Turned Engineer Turned Attorney

The answers from the Texas minister did not sound right to the young attorney who grew up in a ranching community in northwestern South Dakota. The clergyman's responses to questions asked by Darren Hepper as part of an insurance investigation generated suspicion.

The minister's home had been destroyed by a fire in which his wife died. A Texas state fire marshal ruled the blaze accidental. The insurance company involved requested further investigation from the Minneapolis Meager & Geer law firm. Hepper was part of the investigative team. "I interviewed the minister and his answers just didn't add up," Hepper explained. "There was a lot more going on than just a simple house fire."

Further searching revealed the presence of acetone, a fire accelerant, at the fire scene. Although local authorities used a trained police K9 to detect accelerants, most dogs are not trained to detect acetone. Police were alerted, and further investigation revealed that the minister was involved in a relationship with another woman, and that the relationship had come to light just before his wife's death. Eventually, he was charged with murder and convicted of killing his wife. He is currently on death row in a Texas state prison.

"Those circumstances were exceptional," Hepper acknowledged recently. "But it was satisfying to know that my training and background helped to bring a proper ending to an unfortunate situation."

Hepper is one of five attorneys who comprise the Catastrophic Loss group at the law firm. Much of their work is done for insurance companies and focuses on fires and explosions among other catastrophic events. "Fortunately, we don't see arson cases too frequently. But when we do, it usually makes for an interesting story," Hepper said.

Hepper acknowledges such curiosity did not exist when he was a youngster growing up near Isabel, SD, a town of just over 150 people in a remote area. "As a kid, I actually thought I might have a future as a pianist," he said. "I enjoyed playing music and couldn't think of a better way to make a living."

Reality soon caused the youngster to reconsider. The realists were his parents. They told him his career choice was questionable at best, and it would be very hard for him to make a living as a musician. Mom's input did have considerable weight because she was also his junior high teacher. Dad was a rancher. "I think having

**Darren
Hepper**



my Mom as my teacher was more of a challenge for her than it was for me," Hepper said.

His mother certainly knew Hepper, but she knew a lot about all of her students. Isabel is a very tight-knit community. For example, there were about 30 kids in the entire high school during Hepper's school years.

The situation changed significantly during his college years in that Hepper attended South Dakota School of Mines and Technology in Rapid City. The school has an enrollment of about 2,800 students.

"I took my parents' advice and started looking for an alternative," Hepper said. "My search was pretty straight-forward: I looked at the list of starting salaries for college majors, and picked the highest, chemical engineering."

Hepper adjusted well to the engineering curriculum and received an attractive job offer following graduation. He went to work for Dow Corning in Midland, Michigan as a process development engineer. "It was a good match for me," Hepper explained. "I enjoyed the work and found it interesting, always an attractive combination."

At the time, however, he also had a girlfriend who was working in the Twin Cities. Eventually, he decided that relationship would

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ENGINEERS AND THE LAW

be enhanced if he joined her in Minnesota. He did and started working for 3M as a product development engineer at its facility in Hutchinson.

Around the same time, Hepper became aware of work being done by a brother of a friend. The fellow had a mechanical engineering degree as well as a law degree and was working as an attorney focusing on patent law. Further conversation piqued Hepper's interest to where he enrolled in law school at the University of Minnesota. "I thought my engineering background would be an asset in a number of areas," he explained. "Legal work intrigued me but I was a bit concerned about getting too involved in patent law. An attorney can get 'pigeonholed' very easily in that area and you can wind up doing a lot of repetitive, tedious work."

During his third year in law school, Hepper sent his resume to several Twin Cities law firms including Foley and Mansfield, a firm with a practice group specializing in technical investigations. Hepper's technical background caught the attention of Russ Melton, one of that firm's partners. The two got together and Hepper was soon working for Melton's Minneapolis law firm. He continued there until members of its catastrophic unit joined the Meagher & Geer law firm in 2010.

"The transition from engineering to law wasn't easy, but I certainly don't regret it," Hepper acknowledged. "The work I do now is very interesting." Meagher & Geer does considerable legal work throughout the country. "Fortunately, I don't have to travel as much as I used to," Hepper noted. About a third of his work now is in Minnesota. As is the case with most lawyers, Hepper spends almost no time in a courtroom these days. "About 99 percent of the cases in which we are involved are settled before they reach trial," he explained.

Hepper said the switch from would-be musician to engineer and then to attorney has worked well for him. "I do occasionally wonder where I'd be if I'd stuck with music, but I think my parents steered me in the right direction."



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