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REAL ESTATE
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ACHIEVEMENT



BRETT BUCHANAN

David Armbrust, a longtime real estate lawyer at Armbrust & Brown LLP, is known for finding a compromise between developers and environmentalists.

BRIDGING THE GAP

When times get tough, David Armbrust plays the mediator

JEAN KWON | STAFF WRITER

In the late 1990s David Armbrust was one of a handful of people who bridged the gap between staunch environmentalists and developers who held tightly to an unwavering desire to grow Austin.

When it was all said and done, the media dubbed it a “peace accord.” Some called it the Austin equivalent of the Middle East peace treaty.

Armbrust has a habit of doing things others say can’t be done. Longtime friends say he’s the very opposite of a combatant, though ironically he enjoys controversy.

“I like happy endings to tough problems,” says Armbrust, who is 60. “People who lose their tempers — they are the ones who need to sit in the back and let others try to find the solutions.”

The longtime real estate lawyer — head of Armbrust & Brown LLP — has gotten warring factions to compromise time and time again. And he has — and still does — represent some of the biggest development interests in the city, and can be credited with helping create a vibrant real estate economy in Austin.

But his real mission, he says, is to tirelessly give back to the community until he can’t give any longer. He says he owes it to the city he loves.

“I have built a business on this community and I feel in return that I need to make a contribution to this community in a big

way, and try to leave it a better place,” Armbrust says.

Growing up in Albuquerque, N.M., in a lower-middle-class household, Armbrust never took anything for granted, and dreamed big. His first job, in a construction yard chiseling cement, inspired him to pursue a good education.

After majoring in government at New Mexico State University, he served in the army for 18 months before going to law school at St. Mary’s University in San Antonio. Rather than participate in combat in Vietnam, he ran the post office at Fort Bliss in El Paso.

It wasn’t just Armbrust’s fear of blood — which long ago prompted him to abandon his ambition of being a dentist — that caused him to refrain from battles. He simply classifies himself as a diplomat rather than a fighter.

That diplomacy became legendary in the late 90s. It was at that time when Armbrust, then the Real Estate Council of Austin president, forged that peace accord with the Save Our Springs Alliance that paved the way for balanced growth in the environmentally sensitive hills of Southwest Austin, where water flows through the ground to the Edwards Aquifer — the source of drinking water for thousands and the underlying reason why Austin has assets such as Barton Springs.

Before Armbrust, previous SOS Chair-

woman Robin Rather and a few others set the calmer tone, the battles between SOS and real estate developers consisted of shouting and name-calling. Then those key people struck the deal that brought rationality to the discussions.

It was a watershed event that spawned efforts such as the Hill Country Conservancy, which raises money to buy open space and create conservation easements. Armbrust is a past president and current board member. He’s also involved with the Colorado River Foundation, which enables underprivileged kids to experience one of the region’s crowning — and hard-fought-for — jewels.

Armbrust is as known for his character as he is for his professionalism. The fact that many of his clients are his golfing buddies and hang out at his office to have coffee speaks volumes. In fact, says Armbrust, it’s the secret to running a great law firm.

“Our clients are like our friends,” he says. To some extent they are a part of our family. I feel really fortunate because a lot of our clients have been with our firm for 30 years.”

Ed Wendler, who met Armbrust over 20 years ago when Wendler was developing the Wells Branch neighborhood in North Austin, says that Armbrust has a sly sense of humor that belies his seriousness about his work.

“I can’t find anybody as good as he is,”

says Wendler. “He’s a great problem solver, in the sense that he doesn’t get wound-up or locked into a position. He’s good at seeing through that and figuring out how to solve the problem [at hand].”

Local developer John Lewis has known Armbrust since he arrived in Austin, and the two are part of a group that plays golf regularly.

“I’ve never seen David advocate for something he doesn’t believe [in] himself or isn’t good for the city,” says Lewis. “He truly wants what’s best for the city. He doesn’t bring — pardon my French — crap to the city for approval, and has gained the respect of city staff and the City Council [as a result].”

At the same time, Armbrust is a wisecracker socially, say friends.

“David is the king of the needle,” says Wendler. “He loves to dish it out, so you’ve got to dish it back.”

So when Wendler was hit in the face by Armbrust’s golf club 15 years ago, requiring Wendler to have plastic surgery, his friends had a field day. El Arroyo, the restaurant on Fifth Street, featured a marquee sign that read “Armbrust-proof golf helmets: \$99.”

Wendler jokes it’s a testament to his friendship with Armbrust that their “buddyhood” lasted through the incident.

“He’s a terrible golfer, but he’s a really good guy.”



David Armbrust has been helping bridge the divide between the real estate community and environmentalists for nearly two decades.

