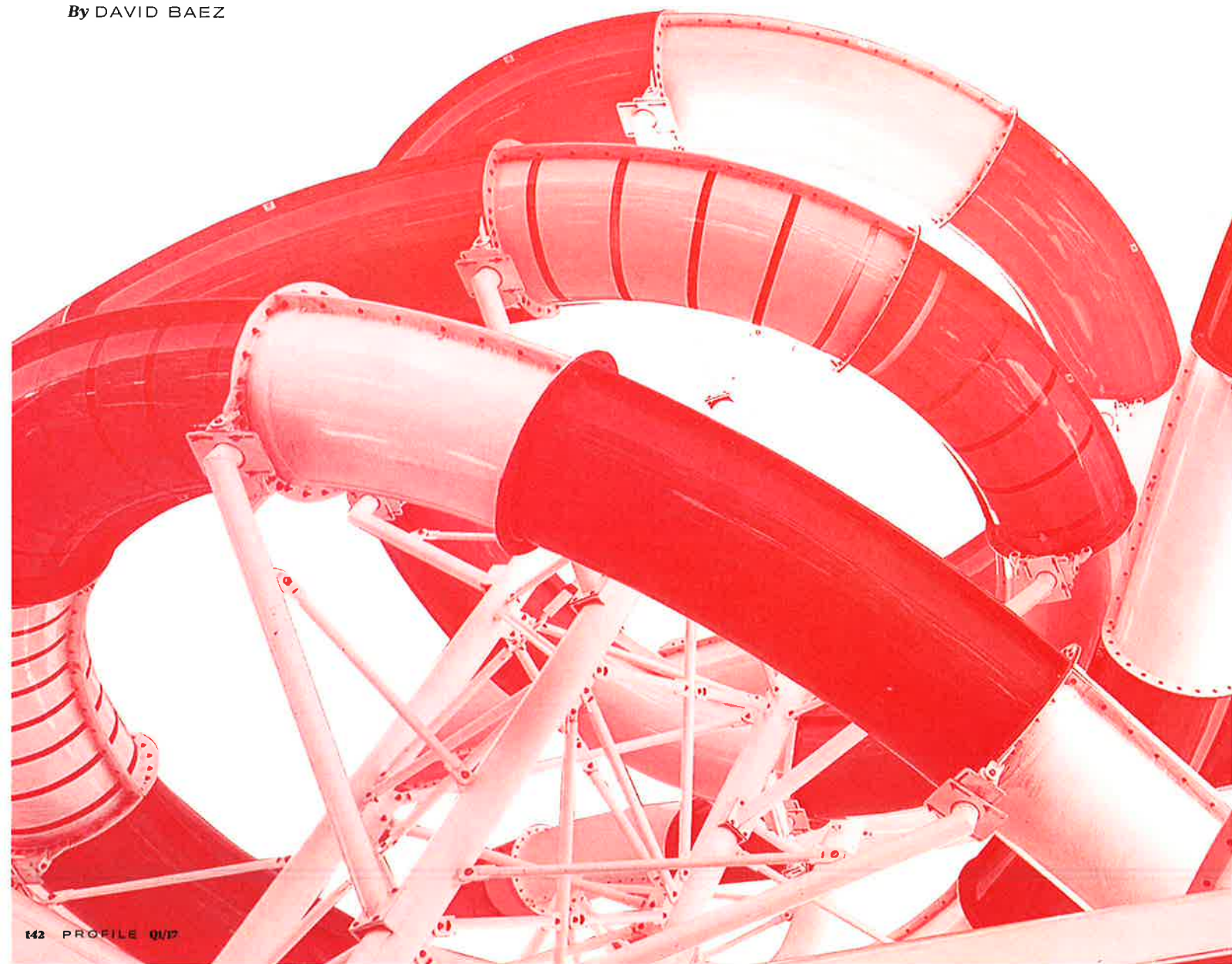
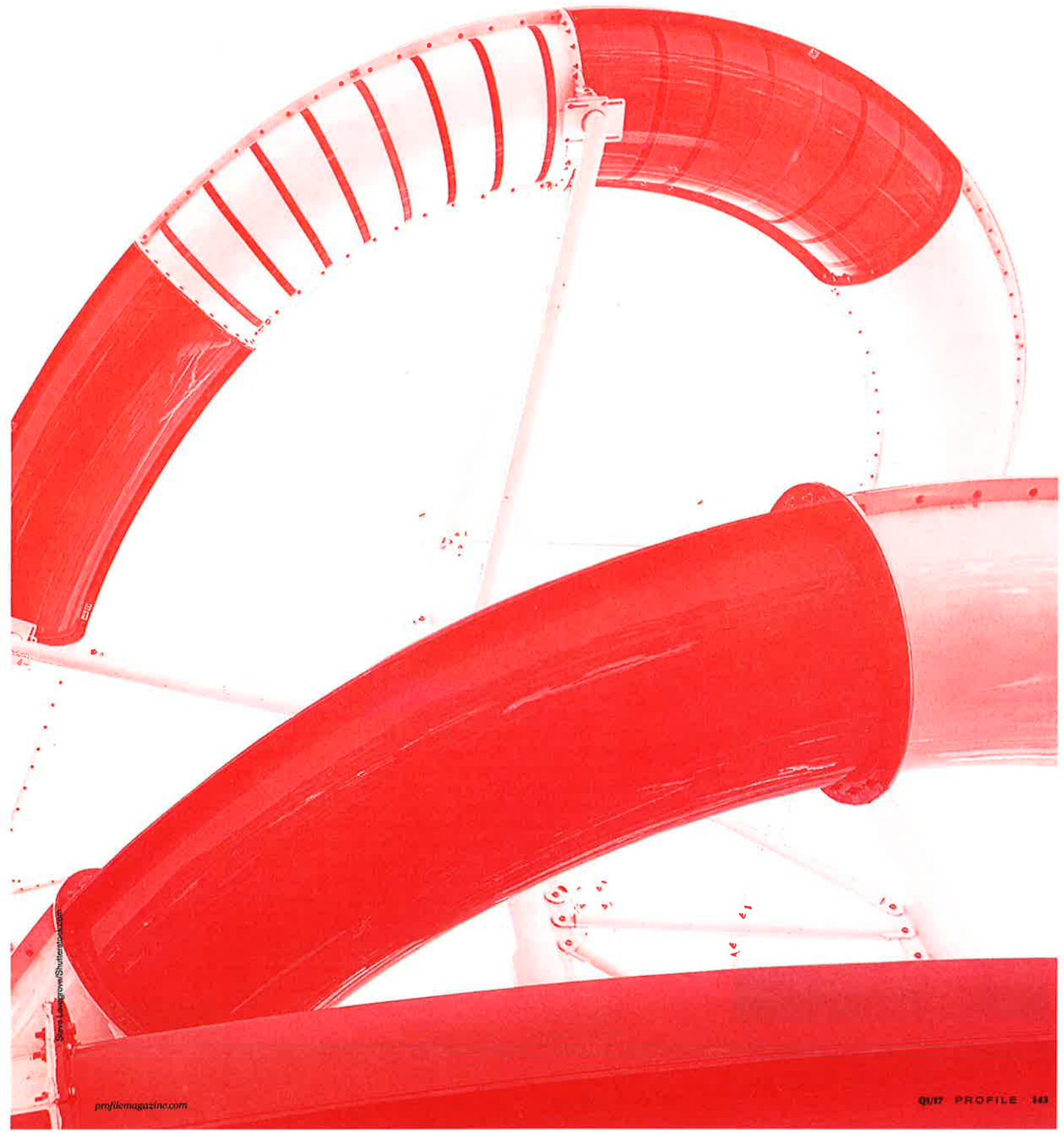


The Law of Attractions

Michael Baroni's legal expertise navigates the twists and turns of the amusement industry as he shields Palace Entertainment employees and thrill-seekers from risk

By DAVID BAEZ





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It's a rite of summer: families and groups of teens swarm to amusement parks during the warm months to take in the thrills and adventure from an assortment of adrenaline-inducing rides. They go to let off steam and experience attractions such as the Black Anaconda at Noah's Ark in Wisconsin Dells, a water

coaster that reaches speeds up to 30 mph as it takes hair-pin turns and plunges its nose into the deep, drenching its giddy passengers.

It's in this same setting that Michael Baroni would likely go unnoticed by park attendees, but he's the general counsel who is instrumental in managing risk both for them and the company. Palace Entertainment runs twenty-two amusement parks, including Noah's Ark, all around the United States. "My number one priority is the safety-first program," Baroni says. "We call every employee a safety officer—even in food service and landscaping and HR—and everyone signs a safety-first pledge."

It makes sense when one considers all the potential risks involved with a major amusement park. The rides must be flawlessly built and maintained, and Baroni adds that Palace Entertainment only works with the world's top-tier manufacturers. Park guests have to be made aware of and abide by the rules for each ride to have a safe experience. Huge amounts of food are prepared in hot weather, and kitchens are crowded with workers. Guests are dashing from one ride to the next in all directions. There are reams of electrical connections and piping and sewage systems to service. Baroni likens it to a small city, a place where all of his legal knowledge is called upon.

Baroni didn't plan to work in the amusement park industry, but he has always sought out jobs in entertainment and media. Unlike many of his peers, he never joined a law firm, always staying in-house. After working for two publishers in New York, where he learned about creative rights and First Amendment issues, he joined Metromedia. He was sent to Silicon Valley to head up legal at Internet connectivity companies, while the parent company continued to embark on massive, fiber optic installation projects across the United States and Europe.

When the Internet bubble burst and Metromedia filed bankruptcy, Baroni landed as general counsel to BSH Home Appliances in "Surf City" Huntington Beach, California. BSH is a joint venture of German giants Bosch and Siemens (combined revenues in excess of \$150 billion with a presence in 190 countries). Baroni found himself working on \$100 million contracts, antitrust matters, marketing/advertising, complex litigation, environmental issues, factory safety, and workers' compensation. Six years into his role, a recruiter connected him to Palace Entertainment.

Michael Baroni

General Counsel

Palace Entertainment

Newport Beach, CA

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M4 proudly joins *Profile* in special recognition of **Michael Baroni** in his role as General Counsel at Palace Entertainment.

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Michael Baroni started his legal career in First Amendment and creative rights before joining American amusement company Palace Entertainment in 2009.

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*Pictured: Michael Baroni, Esq.,
Carla Varriale and David Cohen, Esq.*

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“Palace Entertainment brings together every shred of experience I’ve ever had, from film location agreements to ride construction,” Baroni says. “I love the full spectrum of what I’m able to do, the diversity of the work, which shifts moment to moment. I feel blessed to have this open world of law that I deal with here.”

Baroni has overseen major acquisitions such as children’s amusement park Dutch Wonderland (Lancaster, Pennsylvania), Miami Seaquarium (Virginia Key, Florida), and America’s largest water park, Noah’s Ark. At the same time, the company has trimmed its portfolio, selling fifteen smaller parks in September 2014, which didn’t fit in as well with the business model. “Ironically, the smaller parks were more difficult to manage,” Baroni explains. “Palace has some of the most premier water parks and children’s parks in the country, and some of America’s most beautiful, historic amusement parks from the 1800s. Premier parks are a much better focus for Palace.”

The particularities of the industry also keep days interesting. From an HR standpoint, for example, the company depends largely on a young, temporary workforce. Palace Entertainment hires about 10,000 workers during the season and then lets them go when the parks shut down, only to hire a new batch of workers the following season. That’s a lot of employees passing through the turnstiles, and it requires an abundance of legal oversight.

On the customer side, the company does not use waivers for rides, focusing instead on highly visible and clear signage and repetition. In addition to the signage, a recorded safety message plays on loop as customers wait in line, and the ride attendant repeats the same information. If a park-goer ignores the rules and gets injured, it would be difficult to file a successful claim against the park. “The goal is to quickly educate people—here are the rules, here’s what you have to do to be safe,” Baroni says. “The vast majority of incidents we see come from people being careless or downright foolhardy.”

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MICHAEL BARONI

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The rides may be the most easily controlled aspect of risk. With so many people in the park, every detail matters. Bannisters are built at a certain height, fencing is put in place to guide people safely, and even bushes are planted strategically. In food and beverage, the company has designed its kitchens to minimize the possibility that food workers will collide with each other. "We strive to increase safety by managing people's behavior—designing out the opportunity for people to act in a more risky manner," Baroni says.

Even with all the work to be done in the parks, Baroni somehow finds time to do a significant amount of volunteer work. When he took the job with Palace, he spoke with his CEO about the importance of his involvement with the Orange County Bar Association (OCBA)—which he will be president of in 2017—and was thrilled to find that his boss fully supported his charitable activities.

"I explained that the charitable work I do ends up helping Palace by further empowering me as a lawyer, and enhancing Palace's reputation. He fully agreed to support me, something which I am grateful for on a daily basis," Baroni says. "Lawyers in particular need that enrichment. If your brain is always in just your company's legal work, you're mentally boxed in, you burn yourself out, and it becomes pretty miserable. But you also lose that cutting-edge sharpness and can grow stale in your knowledge and skills. It is imperative to proactively seek new knowledge and skills as a lawyer."

Baroni often cross-promotes his volunteering efforts with Palace, donating park tickets or giving free passes to everyone who shows up for charitable work.

As part of a community outreach group at OCBA, Baroni has been involved in more than twenty events, including pet adoption, beach cleanup, food harvest, and Senior Santa, which donates needed items to senior citizens. He serves food to the needy at an annual Thanksgiving dinner and has set up "Big for a Day" events, connecting lawyers with children from Big Brothers at Palace amusement parks.

Baroni is also dedicated to the work he does with the Constitutional Rights Foundation, visiting schools to educate children on the US Constitution and their rights and responsibilities. He participates in Law Day, mock trial competitions, and at Career Forum, which brings together 1,000 high school students for more than twenty workshops with professionals like police and FBI agents, and companies such as Disneyland and Johnny Rockets. Baroni hopes to get some of them interested in a legal career as well.

"We've received letters years later from attendees thanking us for introducing them to career possibilities, and inspiring them to go for their dreams and chart a meaningful life for themselves," says Baroni, who adds that many of these teenagers had no idea what kind of career they wanted or thought that they'd be a high school dropout. Baroni says, "To get a letter years later from an attendee stating that he thought he'd join a gang but is now enrolled in law school. . . . It's incredibly moving to see that."

For some of those kids, an interest in law might be—as it has been for Baroni—the beginning of a ride of a lifetime. ■

Throughout our 110-year history, Rutan has helped industry leaders like Palace Entertainment develop and implement innovative and effective solutions to their complex legal challenges.

We are proud to congratulate Michael Baroni, Palace Entertainment's general counsel, on this well-deserved honor and recognize his continuing contributions to Palace Entertainment's success.

Greenberg Traurig congratulates Michael Baroni, for his work as general counsel at Palace Entertainment and constantly encouraging ethical business and legal practice. We commend his dedication to improving society through charitable work. Greenberg Traurig is proud of our relationship with Palace Entertainment and we look forward to continue working together.