

MINNESOTA LAWYER

November 6, 2006

www.minnlawyer.com

M DOLAN MEDIA
COMPANY

Vol. 10, No. 45

For the five-attorney Biglow family, practicing together is perfect

By Jane Pribek

In a modest office in the Midland Bank Building in downtown Minneapolis, five members of the Biglow family practice law together. Robert, the family patriarch, works along side four of his children — sons Mike, Mark and John and daughter Eileen Bergmann.

There are no committees, marketing plans or billable-hour comparisons at the Biglows' law office — just the daily morning newspaper crossword puzzle, which they do together over coffee. It's easy to keep things in perspective at a firm where the older lawyers remember the younger lawyers in diapers, and the younger lawyers remember pestering the older ones about their high school dates.

Probably the last reason the Biglows would give for why they practice together is, it's good marketing. But, if it helps bring clients through the door, on top of so many other benefits, so be it.

Mike, the oldest, says clients get a kick out of it. "The first words out of their mouths are usually, 'Oh, a family affair,' followed by, 'How do you all get along?'"

Eileen, the second to the youngest, adds, "I've often had people say to me, 'Do you know how lucky you are that you can all work together?' My family can't even be in the same room together."

Clients love the fact that they're a family, according to Mark, who is the second oldest. "I don't know exactly what brings them here, but my guess is, they have a sense that they're going to be treated fairly and honestly here. Our office is not big; it's not fancy — so I think they get the feeling right away that they don't have to keep their hand clenched tightly over their checkbook when they're here. I think they like the atmosphere and the mood, and the results are quite good too."

The early years

It all started with Robert, a musician/retired Air Force colonel/retired union president who, at 84, still practices law. Lately, he tends to be the first one in the office every day, and therefore he makes the coffee, "and makes sure we return all our phone calls," quips Mark. Although for many years, the joke was that John, since he is the youngest of Robert's eight children, had the auspicious task of keeping the coffeepot full.

Robert established his solo, general practice in 1948, as a newly minted graduate of the University of Minnesota Law School who earned his law degree on the G.I. Bill. (He flew fighter planes in World War II in Europe, and was at the Battle of the Bulge.)

Although he is a Wisconsin native, Robert decided to stay in the Twin Cities area largely because it afforded him the ability to moonlight as a musician. He plays five instruments and had seriously considered a career teaching music, but gave up that dream when he realized how difficult it would be to earn a living. A big believer in family, he wanted to make enough to help put several children through college someday. Practicing law by day and playing music at night seemed like a reasonable compromise.

But Robert's fledgling practice was disrupted when he was called up from the Army Reserves for the Korean War in 1951. After a year's service, he returned home, and in 1953, his life truly began, when he married Genevieve Johanna



Biglow family members (from left to right) Mark, Eileen (Bergmann), Robert, John and Michael all practice law together in the Midland Bank Building in downtown Minneapolis. (Photo: Bill Klotz)

Jaeger, a surgical nurse who later became a longtime receptionist at his firm. (She died of cancer four years ago.)

Robert and Genevieve had five young children under tow by the time Uncle Sam called up Robert to serve again — this time during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The family had to relocate temporarily to Texas during this military stint. The family returned to Minneapolis in 1962, and life as usual resumed.

From sole to family firm

When Mike and Mark applied to law school, it came as no surprise. Both say they had considered other careers, and Robert by no means pushed them in that direction. Once it was a done deal, however, Robert told them both there was a spot for them in his law office. Both took him up on the offer when they graduated and both say that they benefited immeasurably from their dad's guidance.

Mike puts it this way: "He's had so much experience in so many areas of life. He gave us not only legal guidance, but also practical guidance on things you can never pick up in a classroom. He kept our spirits up. And he gave us pointers on how to engage with others; namely, that you treat people with respect — not only your client, but also the person on the other side of the table."

In 1987, Eileen graduated from law school and joined them. She says that the office "needed a woman — and it was good for certain clients who wanted a female attorney, for whatever reason." Several years later, and after some agonizing over the decision, she opted to join another firm down the hall from her family's firm.

"As it happened, my brother, John, was graduating from law school that spring, so I remember justifying the move to myself, because I was a little blue, by telling him, 'You can take my office!'"

John, the youngest in the family, did just that. He says he'd considered other positions, but in the end it was an easy choice for him. He had known many law students who had graduated and gone the big-firm route and knew it wasn't for him.

"There was great security there, and some of the really exceptional ones were getting time in court. But most of them were doing research in a cube, working a ton of hours, and just starting to get into court, second-chairing the lead attorney on a summary judgment motion," he recalls. Meanwhile, his siblings had already tried many cases, and they had lives outside the office. Simply put, they had what he wanted. And, there's nothing like a little sibling rivalry. If they could do it, he could.

Plus, working with the family offered a unique bonus: the opportunity to work with his mom.

John says his mother always spoke about the warm feeling it gave her to be approaching the office in the morning, and seeing a light on inside. It told her that one of her kids was already there. At the same time, she cautioned that a day would come when the light wouldn't be on — that someday, the family wouldn't be together, and that's why it was and is so important to appreciate that time.

Eileen — who had stopped practicing law in 1998 to raise her two young sons — decided to rejoin the family firm in 2003. The atmosphere at the firm — heavy from the loss of the family matriarch to cancer — brightened immediately with the addition of another light under another family member's office door.

Practicing with family

Mark, who lives across the street from his father in St. Louis Park, says that he cannot imagine practicing law in any other setting. Family members keep an eye on each other. They'll say something if someone seems like they need a few days off. And, if someone is wrong about something, which happens from time to time, they'll call him or her on it.

Don't get him wrong; occasionally they do disagree. But this is another area where coming from a large family comes in handy: It makes one an expert at dispute resolution.

"All of us have egos and turf," explains Mark. "By the same token, we all grew up together and knew each other pretty well, so we knew by then that in order for us to

accomplish anything, we had to put petty disagreements aside once in a while. If that meant swallowing hard and saying you're sorry, you did it. And so often, the response was, 'That's OK.' Then you move on. It's not that you ignore a problem, but you put all your energy into solving it, rather than letting it fester."

Anyone thinking of working alongside a family member should think long and hard about the strength of the relationship that's already there, observes Eileen. If two family members are "oil and water," don't think going into business together will bring you closer.

"It's not for everybody. It depends on the family. But, for me, what I appreciate is, with sibs, you can tell it like it is. They're your colleagues, but they're so much more. And it can change your relationship with that person forever. It puts the relationship on a whole new level."

For his part, Mike says that working with his father and siblings has drawn them all closer, if that's possible. But also,

it's kept them in daily contact with their dad. "I talk to other people who tell me they haven't seen their parents in months, and when they do, all they can notice is how much they've aged."

Mark says that one of the key ingredients to the family's success in practicing within the same four walls is that they are really five solos who share space.

"Set up [a family firm] so you never let money come between you and a family member," he advises. "Make sure that how much you or your siblings make isn't a cause for contention. If that means having separate practices in the same office, then that's what it should be. So, if one family member takes a week off and comes back refreshed and happy, you don't have to worry about how that will affect some big pile of money you have to split up. You're worrying more about their physical, mental or emotional health, instead of if they're working hard enough for you."

Eileen additionally advises scheduling downtime — everyday if possible.

"Try to have lunch together, or time to just hang out and talk. Because that's the beauty of practicing with family — the support you'll get from your family is like no other support you'll ever get."

About those lunches: With family members especially, there's no slacking — you'll have to buy once in a while, notes John with a laugh.

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