

DAVID GRUND

Lawyer's Lawyer and the Difference Maker in Family Law Matters

by Sherry Karabin

They say hardship builds character. In the case of attorney David I. Grund, a founding partner at Grund & Leavitt, he's certainly had his share of hard knocks.

Known for his creative solutions and compassion toward his clients, Grund has earned a reputation for scoring hard-fought wins on cases involving all types of issues arising from divorce proceedings.

It's a far cry from his humble beginnings in 1947 when Grund and his twin brother Fred were born in a displaced persons camp. The family arrived in the United States after stops in Belgium and France. They settled on Chicago's West Side in 1956.

While growing up as a refugee, Grund never imagined he would one day become one of Chicago's preeminent family law attorneys. He says he did know, however, that he had empathy for and a burning desire to help others in difficult and trying circumstances.

Grund witnessed his own family go through a number of hard times, working to help out in any way he could.

At about the time Grund turned 9, his father had his first heart attack and could no longer work. His mother, a master tailor in Poland, scraped together some savings. With the help of a cousin, she started a dry cleaning and alteration shop on Chicago's Northwest Side.

"We lived in the back of the store," says Grund. "There were six of us living in three rooms. My parents had one room, the kids were in the other, and the third was the kitchen. We didn't have much, but we were safe and happy.

"My brother and I worked at a grocery store and delivered newspapers so we could contribute," Grund says.

Later, he attended college and law school at night so he could work full time. First, he sold mosaic tile for an importer. Later, he sold life insurance for Metropolitan Life Insurance—a job that helped him improve his communication skills, which served him well when he entered the legal profession.

When Grund graduated from DePaul University College of Law in 1972, he had two things on his mind: passing the bar exam and



marrying Rachel, who is now a retired teacher and adjunct professor of special education.

"She is the love of my life," Grund says. "There is no doubt in my mind that my professional success is, in large part, because of her steadfast support and love."

THE CLIMB

Newly married and ready to embark on his career, Grund was determined to get some trial experience.

His first job in law was with a general practice firm. It proved to be a great experience, he says, because of the wide variety of work he handled.

"They paid my parking fees," he says. "I made a deal where I received 25 percent of all the business I generated."

His first jury trial involved representing a plaintiff in a dram shop action, which imposes liability on bars and taverns for injuries caused

by their intoxicated patrons.

The jury awarded his client \$64,000, which exceeded the \$15,000 limit at the time. "The judge reduced the award, but the thrill of the courtroom permeated my soul. I was hooked," says Grund.

In 1975, he started his own practice after overcoming one large hurdle.

"I needed \$25,000 for the first and last month's rent and to hire an assistant," he says. "I walked into a bank and asked the loan officer to give me a loan. He asked me what I earned. I said nothing yet, but my wife is a teacher and she makes about \$7,000 per year.

"I didn't have any collateral either. I told him, I always repaid my debts. He took a chance and gave me the loan, and one of my clients who was in the furniture business gave me office furniture."

Grund set up his office in a downtown

office building where the owner was offering a year's free rent for anyone willing to sign a long-term lease.

A CHANGE OF FOCUS

The gamble paid off. By 1983, Grund had developed a thriving general practice that included many commercial litigation clients.

Ironically, it was one of his commercial clients who would set him on the path to becoming a family lawyer.

"That client owned a clearing firm and traded commodities and currencies," Grund says. "He was worldly and a really big hitter among traders at the Chicago Board of Trade. He asked me to represent him in his divorce. I said, 'Sorry, I don't do divorce, that's a specialty, but I can refer you to someone who does.'"

Grund says the client insisted, so he agreed to take the case on the condition that he handle it with an experienced divorce lawyer.

"There was a lot of publicity surrounding the case because of the money involved. The client ended up doing very well," Grund says. "As a result of that success, I started getting calls from other divorce lawyers who wanted me to try their cases.

"Commercial litigation can be pretty dry," he says, "but it involved my knowledge of accounting and finance and trial skills that I honed as a litigator.

"As a result, I utilized that knowledge and practice to gain a leg up in my newly adopted field that was still dormant in that regard."

Three years later, the family law cases took over his commercial litigation practice.

"I decided to practice family law exclusively," Grund says. "I had three associates at the time. One came with me, and the other two left and took my commercial work."

By 2003, the firm had 10 lawyers and was bustling with business.

A CHANCE MEETING

In the early 2000s, not only was the firm's family law practice thriving, but its appellate practice had also grown.

One of Grund's cases took him to the Illinois Appellate Court, where he argued before a three-judge panel, which included Marvin Leavitt.

Grund was seeking a reversal at the time, but the appellate court affirmed the trial court. Afterward, Grund met Justice Leavitt at a party, where he explained why he thought Leavitt and the other justices had ruled incorrectly.

"It was a wonderful intellectual discussion," Grund says. "With Marvin, I had met my match. He was very affable and even-keeled.

He was smart, a quick study. It became apparent that we were a good fit."

"I remember that David had appeared before me twice and we affirmed the trial court in both cases," says Leavitt. "However, he was exceptionally bright and had a terrific courtroom demeanor.

"After I left the bench, David called me up and asked me to help him on a couple of cases," says Leavitt. "I was not part of a firm yet, and I was looking for opportunities and a direction. We were very successful on the work we did together, and sometime later he asked me to be his partner.

"I was a bit hesitant because family law was not an area I had been involved with previously. However, he was so inviting that I decided to give it a try."

They went into partnership based on a handshake, and Leavitt says it has been a "honeymoon" ever since.

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most gracious lawyers I've ever met in the profession," says Leavitt. "He's a wonderful leader and mentor, and together we've built a cutting-edge practice."

Leavitt says the two share the same values, including a desire to give back to the community. As a result, the firm's lawyers are encouraged to sit on nonprofit boards and take on pro bono work.

Leavitt and Grund also have other things in common. Both were refugees, born in displaced persons camps. Also, their wives are close friends.

"As a result of our backgrounds, we are both committed to having a diverse and supportive workplace."

Leavitt says Grund is a great partner and an even better friend.

AN ADVOCATE FOR WOMEN

Although Grund grew up in a patriarchal environment where his father made and enforced the rules, he always considered himself to be a feminist.

"I've always felt women, in particular, have a great aptitude for family law," he says. "In fact, the firm has hired more women than men over the years."

One of those women is his daughter, Melissa Grund, who earned a joint law degree and MBA from Northwestern University in 2006.

"My daughter got offers from a lot of big name firms, but I encouraged her to take the job with us for less money," says Grund. "Twelve years later, she's a partner in our firm and a superb lawyer. I am so proud of what she has accomplished and become: a partner, daughter, wife and mother.

"Benjamin, her 18-month-old son, is the joy of my life."

Melissa says her father believes women are the future of the practice, which is why he has hired and promoted so many of them.

"My father is a real Renaissance man," she says. "Not many fathers bring their daughters into their law or business practice, but he truly believes in me and the other women who have crossed his path.

"They broke the mold when they made my dad," says Melissa. "As busy as he was creating a successful practice, he never missed a moment of my childhood.

"From an early age, he impressed upon me the need, especially as a woman, to be independent and to have my own career. He always told me that my education comes first and it would afford me both financial and personal freedom."

Melissa says her father is committed to treating everyone at the firm as family.

"He takes the time to train the associates, emphasizing the public policy behind the law to better their understanding," she says. "He has been an outstanding mentor. He taught me everything. And then he gave me my wings to fly on my own, a sign of a true leader."

THE GLADIATOR

While Grund possesses empathy and compassion for those in difficult situations, he has no qualms about pulling out all the stops when representing his clients.

Melissa says her father constantly strives to develop and create unique strategies to help those he represents.

"His depth of knowledge of the law is remarkable and innovative," Melissa says. "He will literally walk through a brick wall to obtain a fair result for his client, but always within the rules and ethics.

"He is, purely and simply, an ardent student of the law with an unquenching thirst for its nuances," she says. "He often spends his nights awake, thinking and fashioning strategies to solve his clients' problems."

In the late 1980s, Grund represented Chicago-area resident Honor Mogul, who was going through a contentious and difficult divorce.

“It was an extremely arduous process,” says Alyssa Mogul, now a partner at Grund & Leavitt. “My mother had two attorneys prior to David. My siblings and I were extremely worried about what was going to happen to her.

“David was so brilliant and so sympathetic, he even sent my mom flowers when she ended up in the hospital during the divorce proceedings.”

Mogul says she was impressed by the difference an attorney could make in a person’s life.

“David is a very special person,” she says. “I am so lucky to have had him as my mentor. He not only provided me with the tools to help me grow, but he imparts his passion and respect for the law on me and on anyone else who will listen.

“I am only one of many attorneys David has mentored,” she says. “He has done so much to help so many people throughout his life, especially in the advancement of women who sought to break the glass ceiling for women in the legal profession.”

THE CHANGING AREA OF FAMILY LAW

Grund says family law can be a demanding and emotionally grueling practice.

“Indeed, every day of my life I am working with clients who are at the worst point of their lives,” he says.

He adds, however, that it is extremely satisfying when he can see a client through the stressful divorce process.

It is also an area of the law that has undergone and continues to undergo changes.

“When I first got into this field, the laws were terribly unfair to women and children,” says Grund. “Today, the laws have changed dramatically to the point where the rights of women are equal to that of men.”

Among the many changes, he says, are that children are now represented in court by a guardian or counsel. Also, domestic violence is now taken seriously, and laws have been passed to protect women and children.

Grund believes the practice of family law is now extremely complex, more so than any other area of law.

“To practice in this area, an attorney must have mastered subjects such as contracts, trusts, estates, torts, taxation and securities, to name a few,” Grund says.

“It is very important to have a business background or an MBA. The modern family lawyer must also have an understanding of psychology and early childhood development.”

Grund & Leavitt offers to pay for and send most of the associates to MBA programs

so they can achieve “a level of knowledge of finance and accounting competence necessary to practice in this field.”

The one thing Grund does not like about family law is its reliance on inflexible formulas to determine certain financial outcomes in a divorce.

“Now there are formulas for determining child support and maintenance,” he says. “Technology has sped up the process considerably, but I think family law will continue to be an area where the human touch and common sense are necessary.

“A remedy that is just and an outcome that is fair can only be fashioned by a judge with reason and discretion — and not by way of a mathematical formula.”

THE MOVE TO EDUCATE

For many years, Grund conducted in-house classes for the firm’s associates.

“I thought there should be a more formal program for students, so I contacted the dean at Chicago-Kent College of Law and suggested he start an LL.M. program in family law,” says Grund, who serves as an adjunct professor at the law school.

The LL.M. program launched in 2005 and was one of the first in the country.

Harold Krent, the dean of Chicago-Kent College of Law, Illinois Institute of Technology, and a law professor there, says the program addresses the ever-expanding aspects of matrimonial/family law, with courses such as “Family Law Mediation and Negotiation” and “Tax and Financial Aspects of Divorce.” It also includes an externship.

“I admire David for his keen interest in mentoring associates at the firm and his enthusiasm to train the next generation of lawyers,” says Krent. “Indeed, I am gratified that some of David’s students ultimately were hired by his firm and have excelled.”

In addition to teaching, Grund, Leavitt and their partner Jody Yazici are co-authors of the *Illinois Practice of Family Law*, which is used by practitioners, judges and law students throughout Illinois. “It is the veritable family law bible,” Grund says.

At age 71, Grund has no plans to retire now or in the future. “I think they will have to carry me out of my office,” he says. “I like what I do, and I’m good at it. It has its ups and downs, but at the end of the day, it’s all about my wonderful family.”

Looking back on his life, Grund says he is grateful for the opportunities that were given to him to make a life for himself and to help others.

“I am blessed,” he says. “I have everything I could possibly want.” ■