

Grund & Leavitt's David and Melissa Grund



By Paul Dailing

When **Grund & Leavitt, P.C.** partner Melissa A. Grund started walking into courtrooms alongside her father, there were judges who were surprised and delighted by the pairing, she recalls.

It wasn't that the judges were unaccustomed to multiple generations practicing together. David I. Grund is the founding partner of the firm, which handles high-end family law cases in Illinois and throughout the nation.

What surprised the judges was that the Grunds aren't father and son, but father and daughter.

"The son will grow up and join the family business or the law firm or whatever it is," Melissa Grund recalls. "I think you very rarely hear of a daughter joining her father, whether it be in business or law or medicine. That's more unusual."

Today, the two practice together at one of the nation's top family law firms. Its vintage graystone townhouse offices on Chicago's Gold Coast is a go-to destination for business leaders, socialites, elite athletes, entrepreneurs and their spouses during the painful, difficult transition a divorce can bring.

Joining the firm was an irre-

sistible opportunity for Melissa Grund to work with her father, not just as her father but as one of the best family law attorneys practicing today.

"I always say to people: If you have the opportunity to work with someone who's brilliant in what they do and the best in what they do, whatever profession, even if they're selling widgets, then take that opportunity," Melissa Grund says. "He is, simply put, the best in what he does."

Although his grandfather Jacob was a lawyer in pre-WWII Poland, David Grund didn't enter law because of a family connection. Instead, he did it as a means of helping people.

"I felt it was a situation where I could do the most for society," he says.

He earned his J.D. from the DePaul University College of Law in 1972 and became a founding partner of Grund & Leavitt in 1973.

Working in the field of family law, where the sexes are often paired off against each other, the elder Grund came to a new understanding of the role women were forced to play in society.

"Since recognizing that women were second-class citizens in the society within which I grew up, it has been

my intent to support and promote them," he says.

The firm's first associate was a woman, as are the majority of associates today. Seven of the firm's 17 partners are women.

When Grund started working in family law, a woman in the courtroom other than the client was a rarity.

"The irony is women are more suited, or better suited in the family law arena than men," he says.

"Well, I don't know if that's true," his daughter responds.

"I do," David Grund replies.

David Grund quite literally took this commitment to gender parity home as he and his wife raised Melissa, their only child.

"Melissa validates everything I've wanted to see happen," David Grund says. "She's the complete package. She's a wonderful representative of the independent, liberated professional woman who can, as she suggests, stand on her own two feet and mix it up with the best of us."

In 2014, Melissa Grund was selected as one of the "40 Under Forty Attorneys to Watch" by Law Bulletin Publishing Company. Its Leading Lawyers division recently named her to the inaugural class of Emerging Lawyers, newer attorneys who were chosen by the state's Leading Lawyers as the future of the legal profession.

Her professional successes are due in large part to the lessons her parents instilled, Melissa Grund says. She says having an active, involved father was a key component of her develop-

ment as a professional and individual.

It's an unfortunately rare component for many other young women, she says. It's more common for mothers to be supportive in this way than fathers.

"There are very few fathers and very few men who... take an interest in their young daughter and tell them, 'You can be successful in a career, and you can be as successful as my son would be or as any other man would be,'" the younger Grund recalls.

The Empowerment of Solid Education

Although Melissa Grund now works alongside her father, the move was natural, one she arrived at on her own. Her parents never pushed her into law or into any other field. The important part was education, not a particular career path.

"It was never 'You're going to practice law, and you're going to work for me, and you're going to take over,' which I think some parents tell their children," she says. "It was, 'I'm going to encourage and empower you and help you attain all the skills you need and the education you need so you can be a successful individual and a complete person.'"

After graduating magna cum laude from the University of Michigan in 2000, she went to work in advertising at Leo Burnett for a few years. Eventually, she realized law was the field for her, as it had been for her father more than 30 years earlier.

"I grew up knowing a lot

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about the law and how it can help people and was always attracted to that," she says. "My dad has always been a mentor to me. Growing up and seeing how many people he's helped, how creative he is, how strong and brilliant he is and the career and life (he created) for his family, and the people's lives he's helped shaped was incredibly inspirational and moving."

She earned a joint law and master's degree in business administration through Northwestern University's JD-MBA program in 2006. She is currently an adjunct professor at the Northwestern University School of Law where she teaches "Structuring Transactions: Matrimonial Law," keeping the family dedication to education alive.

"Both my parents recognized education meant freedom and independence," Melissa Grund says.

Her teaching extends beyond the classroom, into the firm itself, her father says.

"She teaches the associates. And she's patient. And she's careful to ensure that they're understanding what she's been taught and the experiences. It's just lovely to see that," David Grund says. "I've always said you've got to give back to the profession."

Her father also helps educate the next generation of legal minds as co-director and founder of the Family Law LL.M. program at Chicago-Kent College of Law.

"I did that because it's so important in our profession to give back and to educate the young lawyers coming up," he says. "It's an extremely complex business

that we have, much more so than in the 43 years I've been practicing. It is probably the hardest area of law to master because it encompasses almost every discipline imaginable."

Office Resembles a Home and Family

The father and daughter soon began discussing her joining the firm. It was a natural move, Melissa Grund says, to join a firm that has always been like a family.

"The culture that has been specifically designed and created... is this warm, open, family-like mentality," Melissa Grund says. "Look at the office — it's a home. It's a vintage graystone. That really is, just from the ground up, from the foundation up, the kind of place it is."

She joined up with the firm, the Grunds adding a partner-associate relationship to their father-daughter one. In late 2014, their dynamic changed again when she became a partner at the firm.

Like many families that work together, the Grunds found that separating work and family lives can be tricky, but ultimately valuable, Melissa Grund says.

"It is hard because sometimes you have to say 'This is your boss, not your dad,' or 'This is your dad, not your boss,' but on balance being able to work with one's father and one's father who's so good at what he does is a tremendous joy," she says.

But bosses and employees disagree, just as parents and children do.

While any professionals will encounter disagreements about how best to help the

client, David and Melissa Grund say their disagreements always incorporate a respect for each other's opinions.

David Grund jokes that he's rarely if ever wrong, but that his daughter will get him to reconsider his opinion. Melissa Grund says she's never regretted the times she trusted in her father's experience and expertise.

"I think that's a good thing and a valuable thing in any sort of business," Melissa Grund says. "I think it's good to have diversity of opinions, and it's good when there's a discussion of options and different ways. But at the end of the day, he's the boss, he's the one with experience."

The key is respect, David Grund says. That's the key to good interactions both at the workplace and on the family front.

"Notwithstanding our father-daughter relationship, she respects my position and my experience," David Grund says.

One of the best parts of the working relationship — and one of the opportunities that led her to join the firm in the first place — is the chance to learn from one of the best lawyers working in the field, Melissa Grund says.

That doesn't mean simply doing what her father would do, or handling a courtroom exactly the way he would. She knows that wouldn't serve her as an attorney or, more importantly, wouldn't help their clients receive the best representation possible. She has to be Melissa Grund, not just David's daughter.

"I've taken everything he's taught me and then incorporated in my style what feels

comfortable to me, given my age, experience, gender and everything else, and just personality, and you do the best from that," Melissa Grund says.

David Grund says his daughter will never "take over" the firm, not because of any doubt in her ability, but because Grund & Leavitt doesn't work like that. The firm's collaborative, family-like culture means no one "takes over."

"She'll never take over, just like I never took over," he says.

As for the younger Grund, she says the lessons her parents instilled in her — the value of education and a woman's ability to succeed in any endeavor — are valuable lessons for any young girl to carry into her adulthood.

"Whether you are practicing law or taking over a firm or working in the business world or staying home and raising children, it doesn't matter, because you are a complete human being and you have the education, experience and confidence to make decisions that are in your best interest," Melissa Grund says, as her father looks on with a smile on his face.