



The Times

Lasting family practice

Lawrence law firm celebrates 75 years

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BY BILL MOONEY

LAWRENCE -- At the height of the Great Depression, when businesses were failing and jobs were scarce, two brothers hung out their shingle and risked embarking on their own careers. Although much has changed in three-quarters of a century, the partnership they started has expanded and endured.

Seventy-five years ago this month, Sidney and Amel Stark began practicing law in downtown Trenton. The firm they started has grown to include more than 100 attorneys working in six offices in three states. Stark & Stark, now based in Lawrence, still includes two family members: Sidney's son, Albert, and granddaughter, Rachel.

And the principals like to boast the firm has a collegiality that inspires commitment beyond members of the family tree. "The law firm today is an anomaly because as it has grown it has maintained a real family feeling, where people are not just out for themselves, but really care about each other," said Albert Stark, who joined in 1964.

John Sakson, one of the managing partners, joined the firm 29 years ago, and said in his earlier years he turned down numerous offers to move to other firms because of the environment at Stark & Stark. "It's more than a job," he said. "It becomes part of the fabric of your existence."

Lew Pepperman, the other co-managing partner, is entering his 30th year with the firm, and said the firm itself has resisted overtures over the years to merge with larger practices. In an era when consolidation among law firms has become relatively common, Stark & Stark is still charting its own course.

"The shareholders have decided that we like who we are, and we would rather grow the way we are growing," Pepperman said.

But remaining independent does not mean the firm is standing still. Three years ago, Stark & Stark acquired a smaller southern New Jersey firm, Newman Weiner. Last summer, Stark & Stark acquired two smaller firms in Bucks County, Pa.: Marston & Shensky of Doylestown; and Liederbach, Hahn, Foy & Van Blunk of Richboro. Stark & Stark plans on consolidating those personnel in an office in the Newtown, Pa., area later this year.

In addition, while the firm is still a general practice law firm, it has expanded over the years to include areas such as securities arbitration along with old-line concerns such as personal injury and real estate.

According to Pepperman, the acquisitions, the expanded expertise and the long-term stability of the staff have given Stark & Stark ammunition as it tries to combat encroachment by larger, out-of-state firms that have been opening offices in central New Jersey in the last few years.

"Now, it's more of a business than a profession," Pepperman said, "but I like to think it's more of a balance of the two. But you still need the personal touch. The attorney-client relationship will always be the same."

Physically, though, much has changed. The Stark brothers began practicing law out of what is now known as the historic Broad Street Bank building in downtown Trenton before moving to Lawrenceville in 1981, and then in 1986 to Lenox Drive in Lawrence.

The geography has changed dramatically. "I moved to this area in 1976," said Pepperman, a New York native, "and I remember when I could get off the Turnpike at Exit 9, and come down Route 1 without many lights, and being able to time the lights." The good news, he pointed out, is that the growth of the region has meant more businesses and more clients.

The technology of practicing law has undergone a metamorphosis. Sakson lamented the fact that while the age of videos and computers has brought increased speed and efficiency to the process, it has reduced the amount of face-to-face contact among lawyers. "It affects the ambiance of the practice, so to speak," he said.

But Stark & Stark principals say they want to maintain the personal touch as much as possible. "I love coming to work," Albert Stark said. "I love getting here early, greeting people, saying hello. We have clients who have been with us years and years. To be able to keep up with this culture has been a lot of work, but it has been worth it."

Pepperman agreed. "It's a much faster pace, and probably a more sophisticated pace," he said as the firm prepares to celebrate its 75th anniversary, "but in terms of the basic deals, the litigation, it's still the same. The personal relationship is still the most important thing."

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