



Legal legacies

Passing down the love of the law

The experiences of multigenerational attorneys highlight how natural passions for the profession are instilled and what benefits can arise from making the practice of law a family affair.

by Julie Roumeliote



Kathryn Carlisle-Kesling was inspired to follow her father Gerald Carlisle into the practice of property law after playing many rounds of the classic board game Monopoly with him.

As a little girl asleep below her father's large wooden desk, Kathryn Carlisle-Kesling, of Middleburg Heights, got her first exposure to the legal world. While nestled among stacks of legal files containing deeds, mortgages, easements, bonds and other legal policies in the office of a prestigious downtown Cleveland office building, Carlisle's future career in law began to take root. Like Carlisle, many attorneys find their starts in law from within their own families. This seed of legacy is planted by older generations and spans generations to come. Through stories passed on and careful observation, a legacy ignites a passion or drive to follow the footsteps of a successful family member's path. Carlisle's father, Gerald K. Carlisle, a well-respected property development and real estate attorney, and founder of Carlisle, McNellie, Rini, Kramer and Ulrich, and current co-owner of Ohio Title Corp., began grooming the young Carlisle to carry on the family legacy while playing the classic board game Monopoly. "I did not play the game monopoly without my dad, giving a complete recitation as to the purpose, intent and strategy in leveraging investment with mortgage loans or bonds—from both the borrower and lender side of course," says Carlisle.

The years of observation of a family legacy is what prompted D. Chris Cook, of Lorain, to pursue his law degree. His father, Daniel A. Cook, chairman of the board of

Wickins, Herzer, Panza, Cook & Batista in Avon; grandfather Daniel K. Cook; and great-grandfather Daniel A. Cook, were all successful attorneys. "I acquired an appreciation and admiration for what they did," says Cook. His decision to practice law was closely tied to how much he looked up to his father's own love of the law. "I had so much respect for my father and what the practice of law meant to him," says Cook.

Steven Bell, founder of Steven D. Bell Co. in Brecksville, cites observations of his own father, former U.S. District Judge Sam H. Bell, as a means to learning about law. This early exposure gave him a big advantage when deciding to pursue a legal career. "The advantage was being able to hang around courtrooms and courthouses after my father became a municipal court judge when I was in junior high school," says Bell. "The opportunity to watch all sorts of great and not-so-great lawyers was a valuable education." Bell got his start in the field of law as a trusty helper to his late father. "I began inserting pocket parts into the law books in my father's law library in the mid 1960s," says Bell. "I was soon addicted to reading the BNA Supreme Court Reporter and following the breakthroughs of the Warren Court."

Following a storied path

As future generations of a family seek to find their own career paths, listening to

the stories from family members set to pass down a legacy has a lasting impact on them. Many of us can remember talking to our parents about our favorite toys or superheroes and asking for help on homework or with science fair projects. Carlisle-Kesling's earliest memories of her father include talk of warranties and leaseholds. She now presides over her own law firm that handles real estate and property law, where she applies the childhood talks she had with her father to her own practice.

The story of how a family member arrives at his or her own career aspiration can greatly influence the choice of a future generation. As a teenager, Heather Sowald, co-founding member with her mother Beatrice, of Sowald, Sowald, Anderson & Hawley in Columbus and past Ohio State Bar Association president, was not sure what she wanted to become.

"When I was growing up, women's occupations tended to be teachers, nurses or stewardesses. That's what I always figured I would be," says Sowald. She found inspiration for a new career from her mother Beatrice Sowald, who she had watched fulfill her own lifelong dreams of becoming a lawyer. As the daughter of a lawyer herself, Beatrice hoped to go to law school after first hearing a radio serial program portraying a woman lawyer. "From the time I was a young girl, I wanted to be a lawyer," says Beatrice. With her daughter's eyes looking up to her, Beatrice graduated from The Ohio State University Moritz College of Law in 1966 and became what she always wanted to be. Heather Sowald desired to follow the same dream as her mother, despite being told by her classmates that women were not lawyers. "I would never have gone into law had it not been for mom being a lawyer," says Sowald. By blazing a new path that otherwise would have gone unexplored, Beatrice Sowald had unknowingly started a legacy for herself and her daughter that would ultimately create a lifelong bond and partnership. That legacy reached a third generation as well in Heather's daughter, Alexis, an attorney in Massachusetts.

Fourth generation attorney Elizabeth Stephenson from New Philadelphia followed a series of men, including her great-grandfather, grandfather, father and uncle, into the practice of law. Her desire to show that a woman can be a lawyer too had a strong impact on her pursuance of a legal career. "As early as high school, law is



Top Left: Matthew Bryant is a second generation attorney. Top right: Timothy R. Piatt (left) and Timothy P. Piatt (right) are successful law partners in North Canton. Timothy P. Piatt's wife, Jennifer Piatt, also an attorney, is in the center. Bottom Left: David S. Bloomfield, Jr. found success on the same path as his parents, Sally Bloomfield and David S. Bloomfield, Sr. Bottom Right: Four generations of Stephenson family attorneys including Elizabeth Stephenson, Robert Stephenson and their father Richard Stephenson, seated, have continued a long family legacy started in the 19th century.

what I wanted to do. I always liked social studies and government, so it was a good fit," says Stephenson. "I was influenced by so many attorneys around me, and a major part was that I wanted to prove that a woman in our family could be an attorney too," says Stephenson. Her great grandfather started the family law firm in Tuscarawas County in 1887. Her father, Richard L. Stephenson II, carried on the firm, and today her brother, Robert R. Stephenson, continues Stephenson Stephenson & Carrothers. Having a love for the law and seeing her family members enjoy their career further influenced Stephenson. She added, "I saw what my family members did as challenging but a rewarding way to help people and make a living at the same time."

Following in the footsteps of successful family members is what inspired Matthew Bryant, attorney at Dixon & Hayes, LTD in Toledo, to begin practicing law. "I chose to go into law, as I saw it as a rewarding and important service to the community," says Bryant. He too followed

a long list of family members into the field of law, including two grandfathers and several uncles. "I witnessed my family members become established and successful practitioners in their fields," says Bryant. His brother is currently on the same path and will be graduating with a law degree next year.

Stepping out of the shadow

With the pride of family legacy comes the pressure of living up to it also. John D. Holschuh Jr. is all too familiar with trying to measure up to a successful predecessor. It seems that law was in his blood, as the son of a well-respected trial lawyer and judge, John D. Holschuh. Watching how hard his dad worked at the practice of law was initially a deterrent for the younger Holschuh. "I thought I'd be a doctor, but I ended up being a medical malpractice lawyer." Holschuh shared that his love for debate, a love his dad helped foster, is what ultimately hooked him to the practice. This decision was nurtured by his father, whom he says, "always encouraged and supported, but never pushed."

Holschuh went on to practice in a slightly different role than his father. By stepping out onto his own wing of the law, Holschuh wasn't just in his father's shadow. He became very active in bar associations. "I was doing things that he never did, which he was very proud of," says Holschuh. His father, seeming to be his biggest fan, was the first to congratulate him after a jury verdict also. "When I had a jury out, he was probably more nervous than me," says Holschuh. "The first thing I did when I got a verdict was I called my dad and shared the news with him." Living up to his father's name was more of an advantage for Holschuh who readily faced the challenge he gave himself of never wanting to disappoint his father by opening doors to his own future.

A family legacy also inspired Colleen Bell to go into law like her late grandfather Judge Samuel H. Bell; father Steven D. Bell; and her mother Jane Taylor, a former president of the Ohio State Bar Association. "My mom and dad would often take me and my brother to the office when we were growing up," says Bell. "I always liked playing on the typewriter and the Dictaphone, and became very interested in a case my dad had when I was about 10. I went to a number of the meetings he conducted as part of that case, and eventually went to see the trial. It was that experience that made me realize how much you can help others through the practice of law."

Bell has decided to pursue her own type of legal career away from the courtroom that both her mother and father found success in. She is currently serving as legislative counsel to U.S. Senator Clair McCaskill. Steve Bell attributes his daughter's success to her own drive and determination and not the family legacy. She proudly admits she has emulated the commitment of her family members. "I can see very clearly in all the lawyers in my family the dedication to community and the spirit of the law," says Bell. In regard to the future of her family's legacy, she added, "I hope that should anyone else in my family choose to practice law, they will do so with this same passion and professionalism."

The family business

Becoming partners in law is a decision that many family members make, either voluntarily or involuntarily. Not only may a family member establish a legacy, he or she may also start a firm that future generations aspire to uphold.



Third generation attorney Randy Dixon, left, continues the neighborhood family law firm started by his late grandfather in 1910. His father Robert Dixon, right, retired from the practice nearly four years ago.

Following two generations of lawyers was not the path that Randy Dixon of Toledo originally intended to pursue. His grandfather, George Dixon, started a family law firm in 1910. Randy's father, Robert Dixon, graduated from law school, the same year that George passed away, and took over the firm. After finishing college, and while working in California, Randy took the LSAT and did very well. He attempted to try his own hand at law even though he felt no pressure from his father to carry on the family legacy. He joined his father in practice at the small neighborhood family law firm in 1980 and quickly found out just how hard his father worked.

Both Dixons shared that working together was an advantage. Although Robert Dixon was not able to practice with his father, he is grateful to practice with his son. Throughout their partnership, each of them has learned something unique from the other. "Randy has a fresh approach to the law, which I enjoyed and adopted," says Robert. His modern methods to handling the various aspects of running a law firm and streamlining business practices helped the neighborhood law firm remain successful. Alongside his father, Randy found himself eager to practice law with a

highly respected and well-liked man and attorney, while carrying on the legacy his grandfather started. "As opposed to Dad not being able to practice with his father (George), I was able to practice with my father on many things," says Randy.

The gratification of sustaining a legacy was especially clear in 2004 when Randy ran across some old legal documents that contained the signature of his late grandfather, George Dixon. "It was neat to see the work that he was doing back then, which is the same thing I do now. It reminded me how long we have been at this and how long we have been helping people," Randy says. After retiring nearly four years ago, Robert Dixon reflects fondly on his partnership with his son and how he has worked to cement a solid foundation and lasting legacy for him. "I thought I was building something which could be transferred to my son. I felt more comfortable retiring because he was going to receive the benefits of my labors." Randy Dixon continues the firm Dixon & Hayes, LTD with a promise to uphold the same neighborhood friendly values his predecessors started.

Heather Sowald recalls the promise her mother Beatrice made to her if she finished law school. "When I told my mom I

wanted to be a lawyer, she said that when I graduated law school we would start our own firm together," says Sowald. In fact, after she was sworn-in in 1979, they opened their law firm together in March 1980. Despite having graduated from law school more than 13 years after her mother, Sowald found herself on uniquely equal ground with her mother. "We started out as equal partners in the firm. While she knew how to practice law, she didn't know how to run a law firm because she worked for legal aid prior," says Sowald. While many younger generation lawyers may step into an already established family firm, she and her mother found themselves learning side by side to navigate the waters of having their own legal firm. "We truly were trying to figure it out together," says Sowald. Although they are founding partners, the Sowalds have rarely co-counseled on cases together during their 32-year partnership. However, Sowald attributes much of what she has learned about ethics and domestic relations to her mother. "To have her here has been such a blessing," says Sowald.

Going into the practice of law was not at the top of the list of career choices for Timothy P. Piatt from North Canton. After watching his own father, Timothy R. Piatt, achieve his lifelong dream of becoming a lawyer, he had different ambitions as a child. "For a while I wanted to be a paleontologist, but once I got past 5th grade, that interest died away," says the younger Piatt. "I ended up going to college to be a teacher, but I was frustrated by the inner workings of school districts." However, the family legacy eventually crept into the forefront of Piatt's future. "Looking back, it seems that I was always 'destined' to become a lawyer," says Piatt. After graduating from law school, Piatt hoped he could work alongside his father, who he has "always looked up to." That dream became a reality six months after he began his first job out of law school. He and his father are now partners at Macala and Piatt, LLC, in North Canton. Piatt shares the advantages to practicing law with the father he admits he is "very much like." "Just like it was helpful to ask him for hints on driving or hanging up drywall, it's helpful to be able to ask him about situations that I know he's been through before in the law practice," says Piatt. Piatt learned long before his legal partnership with his father that their father-son partnership was just as valuable.

Lessons passed down

The greatest influence that family members have on us, and what is sometimes the largest part of their legacy, are the lessons they teach. Kathryn Carlisle-Kesling attributes her father with teaching her to look to people to find America's success. "I learned from my dad—that hardworking, sometimes rural or urban, no matter the nationality, religion, age, or gender, often poor, but always overworked and underpaid people—are the reason that America has succeeded and these people need to have proper access to our court system and the law," says Carlisle. "They also need good employers who pay a living wage. He instilled in me that, this was the job of the 'neighborhood' or 'country lawyer' and that you should never forget to take care of those individuals, who are most vulnerable in society."

Matthew Bryant learned valuable lessons from his family members to help him achieve success in his practice. "I have learned that professionalism is of paramount importance in the practice of law. It is something that is vital to the client, to enhance/repair the prestige of the legal career, and it fosters long-lasting relationships." Chris Cook echoes this lesson. He shares that one of the most important lessons he learned from his family members was, "Your clients deserve your attention, respect and 100 percent effort." Cook holds the practice of law as a privilege and honor that should be treated with respect and professionalism. Timothy Piatt attaches importance to a lesson he learned from his father, that being a legal professional is not an easy job. "You have to absolutely want to win at every turn, but you also need to be absolutely fair and absolutely honest in your endeavor," says Piatt.

Erin Dickinson of Vorys, Sater, Seymour and Pease in Akron spoke of the advantages to having a father in the legal profession. "Dad is the toughest judge of our work— that's an advantage and a disadvantage." She has learned important lessons from her father, Judge Clair Dickinson of the Ninth District Court of Appeals in Akron. Her brother, Matthew Dickinson, is a magistrate in Summit County. "Dad taught us everything. But mostly, he has taught us the value of good writing and professionalism."

The most fundamental lesson John D. Holschuh learned from his father was the value of reputation. "I heard all the stories

about how honest and reputable and what a great lawyer my dad was," says Holschuh. He emphasized what his father taught him about maintaining a reputation of character. The goal to fulfill the character traits of honesty and integrity that his father so faithfully instilled in him has become the foundation of Holschuh's career. "Never do something for the money. Do it for the practice or profession of law. Do it because you want to do the right thing."

Carrying on the legacy

Living up to a family legacy can be challenging. With this legacy comes a great deal of pressure to carry it on with the same integrity and passion as previous generations. Bryant has found this challenge to be inspirational as well. "Of course, living up to the reputation and/or legacy that the family member established is challenging, but this serves as inspiration too," says Bryant. "You soon realize that you have to live to please yourself and exceed your own goals and aspirations." He hopes that the legacy within his family continues to uphold the strong ethics and values that he and his ancestors have set. "It used to be said that the legal profession was an honorable one, and I hope that this legacy in my family reflects that into the future."

While passing on a legacy can be important to a family, parents want their children to make the decision thoughtfully with their own needs and wants in mind. Third generation attorney David Bloomfield Jr. of Porter, Wright, Morris & Arthur in Columbus shares, "I grew up always wanting to be an attorney, despite the efforts of my parents, who wanted to make sure that I understood what I was doing in entering the profession." Bloomfield succeeded his grandfather Paul Ward, uncle Steve Ward, mother, Sally Bloomfield, and his father David S. Bloomfield Sr. His desire to carry on the family legacy was apparent as he followed his mother's lead to become the first mother-son combination to be president of the Columbus Bar Association. He has high hopes of passing on the same legacy rooted in pride to his own children. "I hope that my children are proud of our family's dedication to the legal profession. It would be fun to have a fourth generation carry on that legacy," says Bloomfield.

Chris Cook hopes that his children arrive at the decision to go to law school on their own basis. "I would love for my son or daughter to go to law school, but



John D. Holschuh Jr. with his late father, a well-respected trial lawyer and judge.

as I was never pushed by my family, I would never push either of them." Instead of insisting on carrying on the family law legacy, Cook hopes for his children to carry on a family legacy of something greater. "I hope that I leave a legacy of professionalism, competence and service started by my great-grandfather and passed down to my grandfather and father."

John Holschuh watches as a proud and hopeful father while his son, John D. Holschuh III makes his own unique path through law school, carrying the family torch of honesty, integrity and reputation. With regard to carrying on the Holschuh family law legacy he shared, "I hope he does what he loves and enjoys it as much as me and my dad." ■

Author Bio



Julie Roumeliote was a publications intern for the Ohio State Bar Association. She graduated this spring with a degree in communications from The Ohio State University.