

When law is the family business

By Jane Pribek

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Editor's note: This is the second in a three-part feature series looking at Minnesota lawyers who practice law with other members of their families.

The Matoniches – One of Julie A. Matonich's earliest childhood memories is of her dad, Edward J. Matonich, taking her to "calendar calls" at the courthouse, starting when she was 3 years old.

"He kind of pioneered 'Take Your Daughter to Work Day,'" she observes. "It was a way for him to have fun and expose me to what he did. But to be honest, I remember this big judge in a black robe, and it was kind of frightening."

Lest you think that throughout her entire childhood, she was traumatized by scary judges, actually, the opposite was true. The calendar calls were fairly infrequent, and Julie says that her dad kept his professional life remarkably removed from his home life. Now that she's grown, a trial lawyer herself and she practices with him at Matonich & Persson, Chtd., she knows how challenging that can be.

Ed says he has always known that Julie had the potential to be a successful attorney, even as a child. "I figured it out when I was teaching her how to swim, and I threw her in the water. She came up smiling," he says.

While he is passionate about his profession, in some ways, it wasn't the path he wanted his daughter to choose, because it can be such a demanding job. So, while Julie was in college and he was urging her to keep her options open, she was applying to law schools, undeterred.

It is a stressful job at times, she agrees. But it's better to share those pressures—as well as the victories—with loved ones. Julie joined the firm in 1997, and the two have worked on countless personal injury cases together, almost all with positive results. The largest verdict they've earned together is \$3.3 million, although both emphasize that the entire firm works on the large civil cases, and it was truly a team effort.

As to why she chose to work with her dad when other opportunities were available, Julie says, "Once I realized that I loved trying cases, it became clear to me that the best opportunity was with his firm.

"There's nothing better in terms of mentoring than working with your father, who gives you everything: guidance and access to cases. I've had exposure to big cases that a lot of my friends from law school weren't getting at that stage of their careers.



Ed Matonich and daughter Julie practice at the same firm, although Ed works at the Hibbing office and Julie works out of the firm's Minneapolis branch.

She continues, “You never really know what’s going to happen going into a family business. The newspapers are full of stories of family business disasters. But it’s been working out really well.”

Julie works out of the Minneapolis branch of the firm, while Ed works in Hibbing, where he established the firm in 1972.

The geographic distance between them dictates that they work many of their own cases. Also, Ed has limited his practice to civil litigation, while Julie takes on a sizeable number of criminal defense cases. Still, they manage to talk almost daily, sometimes about their cases, and always, about the granddaughters, ages 2 and a newborn. Having Julie in the Twin Cities area is a huge convenience, because frequently, the defense experts reside there as well, so she can handle their depositions. Although if Ed had his way, she’d be in Hibbing too.

Very few children get the chance to see their parents’ professional abilities and achievements first hand, so Julie has treasured that experience. She adds, “I’ve been in courtrooms across the state now, where people say to me, ‘Are you Ed’s daughter?’ They inevitably have some great story or anecdote to tell me. So it’s been kind of fun for me to get to know him through other people’s stories as well.”

She offers one piece of advice to anyone considering practicing law with a family member: “For younger lawyers especially, one of the things to keep in mind when working with a parent or maybe a nonfamily member but someone you respect greatly, that you not try to be that person, but be yourself. Not everybody has a big booming voice like James Earl Jones. My voice would never come across like his, or my dad’s. And I think the earlier you figure that out and develop your own style, the better. I think in one of my early trials, I tried a little too hard to be Ed Matonich, and it wasn’t my best closing argument.”