

THE ORIGINALS *The Apprentice*

THE LEGAL PROFESSION HAS CHANGED A LOT OVER THE PAST 40 YEARS. AS PART OF OUR 40TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION, WE THOUGHT IT WOULD BE INTERESTING TO TAKE A STEP BACK IN TIME WITH “THE ORIGINALS” – THE SEVEN ATTORNEYS WHO JOINED JOHNSON & BELL IN THE 1970S AND STILL ARE PRACTICING TODAY. WE SAT DOWN WITH EACH OF THEM TO FIND OUT HOW THE LEGAL PROFESSION HAS EVOLVED, WHAT CASES BUILT THE FIRM OR THEIR OWN INDIVIDUAL CAREERS, AND THE VARIED PATHS THEIR RESPECTIVE CAREERS HAVE TAKEN OVER THE PAST FOUR DECADES. WE HOPE YOU ENJOY THEIR INDIVIDUAL STORIES.

Peggy Unger is on a winning streak. Since joining Johnson & Bell in 1979, Unger has tried 35 cases to verdict. She lost the first two, and hasn't lost a case since. Unger was among the first female trial attorneys and the 13th person to be hired at the firm.

“My goal when I started at Johnson & Bell was to become an accomplished trial lawyer,” Unger says. By the late '70s, the firm was handling a large volume of malpractice cases. “I had an opportunity to watch medical malpractice cases being tried, and then to try them at a relatively young age.”

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Unger's first taste of medical malpractice helped secure her job at Johnson & Bell. After graduating from law school, she worked briefly as an associate for a prominent Chicago plaintiff's attorney. It was the first phenylketonuria (PKU) case tried in Illinois that introduced Unger to Johnson & Bell. Unger worked up the case and sat through the trial. Bill Johnson represented the defendant pediatrician. He hired her shortly after.



Unger second chaired many cases early on and was Johnson's associate for a number of years in the 1980s. In 1983, four years after being licensed as a lawyer, she tried her first case, a medical malpractice case with a \$5000 demand. “Cases with such small damages are rarely, if ever, tried these days,” says Unger. “Unfortunately, the high cost of bringing medical malpractice cases has eliminated the opportunity for young lawyers to try cases with low verdict potential. Escalating verdicts have necessitated experienced trial counsel in medical negligence trials.”

The first office Unger worked in for the firm was on the 19th floor of One North LaSalle. The office space was certainly less elaborate than subsequent office spaces. “We had a fair number of offices whose windows faced a brick wall,” she explains. “Our main conference room held about 20 people. We

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were allowed to select the paint color or wallpaper for our office.”

Over the years, the office space evolved. “We’ve had office space with fantastic lake views, boutique space in a wonderful Art Deco building, and office space with beautiful city views,” she explains. “Our office décor has evolved from traditional to contemporary.”

“Our management truly values family; there has always been an effort here to accommodate a lawyer’s family needs.”

The style of practice has also evolved over time. “In the 1980s, we were a young firm. The associates would regularly work late into the evening and on Saturdays. That provided time to watch cases being tried during the week,” she explains. “There were often medical negligence trials with 5 or 6 defendants. These cases provided the opportunity for young defense lawyers to observe different trial techniques and strategies. We were able to watch 5 or 6 defense lawyers cross examine a single witness. It was a really beneficial apprenticeship. My style today is a conglomerate of what I saw other trial lawyers do years ago.”

Since then, Unger has tried a variety of cases, but says her niche has become the out-of-the-ordinary case with sensitive issues. “I don’t know if it’s my age, my gender, or my experience, but I do tend to attract unusual cases,” she notes. “Currently, I handle a fair number of invasion of privacy cases. I have handled a fair number of civil cases arising from sexual assault. And, I have handled many cases of alleged psychiatric malpractice.”

Unger credits her longevity with the firm to its “family friendly philosophy”. That philosophy has allowed her to maintain a demanding trial practice and raise two daughters. “Our management truly values family; there has always been an effort here to accommodate a lawyer’s family needs.”

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