

THE ORIGINALS *The Quarterback*

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.

Bill Johnson can scramble. As quarterback of the Marquette University football team in the 1960s, he learned to scramble to avoid opposing teams’ defensive players. A few years later, he learned how to scramble for a different opportunity.

Marquette University announced it was disbanding its football team prior to Johnson’s senior year. The announcement left him scrambling to find a new career path.

Ultimately, he decided that a legal career held a lot of interest. It turned out to be a good decision, resulting in a courthouse meeting that would change the trajectory of Johnson’s career.

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Johnson was trying a case at Cook County Courthouse in 1975 when John W. Bell came to watch the trial lawyer successfully defend his client. Intrigued and impressed by Johnson’s courtroom style, Bell succeeded in recruiting Johnson to join his boutique law firm one month later. The firm evolved into the future Johnson & Bell, Ltd.



“We were all young and had big case loads,” recalls Johnson, who took the reins as firm president in 1979. “I never thought I’d be lucky enough to get a job at a 100-lawyer firm, much less manage it.”

In addition to overseeing the firm’s day-to-day operations, Johnson has taken a leadership role as one of its premier litigators, trying countless high-profile catastrophic injury and mass tort cases in Chicago and across the United States.

His career breakthrough came with the 1977 fire that destroyed the Beverly Hills Supper Club in Southgate, Ky., killing 165 people. In the ensuing suit, Johnson and H. Patrick Morris represented a wire and cable manufacturer, and following an eight-week trial, the jury returned a not-guilty verdict in favor of the defendants.

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“I had one of the key defendants,” Johnson says. “It was a multimillion dollar case.” And while the verdict was reversed on appeal, and later settled, Johnson says he met a lot of excellent lawyers in the process, and “the firm grew in size and status.”

He started traveling a lot during the ‘80s and ‘90s, handling cases including the Miamisburg Train Derailment, in which J&B represented the tank car manufacturer; the DuPont Plaza Hotel Fire in San Juan, Puerto Rico, in which J&B represented two defendants; and the Bogalusa Chemical Spill, in which it represented the defendant in a class action suit.

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And despite its success, like any firm, Johnson & Bell had its challenges. Johnson recounts when several lawyers left to form their own firm in the ‘90s, and the headcount dropped from 95 to 65 attorneys. In retrospect, he says, it was beneficial for J&B.

“Sometimes you have to take a step or two back before moving forward,” he says. “Once they left, the morale rose, and we’ve been on the upswing ever since.”

One of the biggest changes in the last four decades is the firm’s client base, Johnson says. “We started as an insurance defense firm with 2-3 major clients,”

he says, which represented more than 80% of its business. In the last decade that number has dropped to less than half of its business, as more and more insurance firms use in-house counsel, and “We had to expand the scope of our practice to self-insurers.”

“We encourage our younger lawyers to go out and bring in new business,” he says. “In the past, clients were clients for life. That’s no longer true and so a large part of our attorneys’ responsibilities is to look for opportunities to bring new clients to the firm.” One thing he couldn’t have foreseen, he adds, is the ongoing asbestos business. “I thought it would be dying out 20 years ago, and yet that’s still a good part of our business.”

“I don’t have a grand plan,” he says. “It’s where you find a niche, and can it be profitable.”

Perhaps more than anything, the enduring partnership of Johnson and Bell is key to the firm’s longevity.

“We don’t agree on everything,” says Bell. “The bottom line is Bill has been one hell of a leader for the firm. He’s just what I saw when I saw him first trying the case. He has a presence and credibility. He’s also a very persuasive attorney. He’s like the quarterback on our team—he’s our leader.”

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