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Professional pathway: Entrepreneurial background proves valuable for attorney

By Sheila Pursglove

Legal News



A Michigan State University graduate, attorney Charley Lawler of Clark Hill earned his juris doctor from MSU College of Law.

Before his law career, Charley Lawler owned and managed The Country Market in East Lansing for almost 20 years, and two prior entrepreneurial ventures. Those experiences serve as a bonus in his work as an attorney with Clark Hill in Lansing where he practices civil and commercial litigation, real estate law, administrative law, and construction lien law.

“I’m probably one of the few attorneys who has hired, fired, trained and counseled the number of employees I have,” he said.

“Few attorneys have had the experience of

making sure there is a check for your employees every week, buying insurance, borrowing money from banks for investments, buying and selling businesses, experiencing a fire that completely destroys one location, and making mistakes — we learn more from our mistakes than from our successes.”

“I’ve probably experienced what most of my clients have experienced and can speak their language,” Lawler said.

The law was a path Lawler had always wanted to follow. He received his B.A., with honors, from Michigan State University with a marketing degree in Food Systems Economics and Management, and spent three decades in retail before following his heart.

“I was involved in a business that did not have a bright future — my wife urged me to apply to law school and, when provided a scholarship, it seemed like the right thing to do,” he said.

He went on to earn his J.D., *cum laude*, from MSU Law.

“Law school was a collection of a wonderful group of bright people — caring, inclusive of the old guy in the class, and willing to do what it takes for all to succeed,” Lawler said. “It was a life changing experience for my family and I.”

A student in the Fieger Trial Practice Institute at MSU Law, Lawler was hired into Clark Hill’s litigation practice group in 2004.

“My niche just kind of evolved,” he said. “It’s fun because I see a wide variety of cases and individuals. I’ve handled cases from simple MIPs to representing a large pension fund relating to a \$20 million-plus land investment in Texas.”

When a large construction company filed for bankruptcy and the owners filed personal bankruptcy, Lawler and his colleagues represented a number of material suppliers.

The largest portion of the litigation revolved around an \$18 million hotel development.

According to Lawler, the owner did not want to pay subcontractors and only wanted to pay the contract amount.

“Most subcontractors took settlements early — the clients we represented were last on the job and hung in there to get 90 percent recovery,” Lawler said. “The interesting part of the case were the actions of opposing counsel – I think his client may have been given unrealistic expectations.”

A 2012 case, *Ingham County Treasurer v. Rigby*, involved foreclosure and a suicide.

When lakefront property on Lake Lansing was foreclosed due to nonpayment of taxes, the property owner had a redemption period of about 45 days.

The owner killed himself during the redemption period and was discovered 5-6 weeks after the redemption period ended.

“His heirs sued to set aside foreclosure for lack of notice,” Lawler said. “The case has been to the court of appeals and the supreme court and is now back in the court of appeals as the circuit court did not — in our client’s point of view – rule properly as required by remand from the supreme court.”

In a farm lease dispute, a farmer leased property from an elderly couple for years before they died.

Lawler’s client had invested large sums of money to maintain and improve the property over the years and had a favorable lease rate because of his improvements.

“Two of the three sibling heirs tried to break the lease — a poorly written one I might add,” he explained. “The two heirs seemed to have different objectives and, through mediation and settlement, my client was able to buy the parcel of property he wanted from one heir and was able to lease the remainder from the other heir.

“The people you meet on all sides of these matters are what makes it interesting,” Lawler said. “Smart people do dumb things and if you don’t understand something, just ‘follow the money.’”

A member of the American Bar Association, the State Bar of Michigan and the Ingham County Bar Association, Lawler currently serves on the ICBA board of directors.

“The ICBA provides a great opportunity to meet other attorneys for friendship, interaction, education and career opportunities,” he said. “ICBA is one of the best investments an attorney in mid-Michigan can make.”

Lawler and his wife, Karen, make their home in Okemos with their children Stephen and MacKenzie. His leisure pursuits include fishing, four wheeling, snowmobiling, golf, coaching youth sports, officiating high school sports, lacrosse, Spartan sports and spending time with friends and family.

His community involvement includes the Okemos Lacrosse Club, Okemos Sports Boosters and he serves on the board of governors of the Hiawatha Sportsman’s Club. He also serves on the board of directors of Elite Nation Basketball, on the advisory board of Families Against Narcotics and on the board of U.S. Lacrosse—Michigan.

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