

Gordon Gates

Mentored by the Best,
Now He's the Leader

by Jason Nevel

SPRINGFIELD—The iconic banker JP Morgan's famous quote about lawyers could very easily hang on the office wall of Springfield-based attorney Gordon W. Gates. After all, it would probably save him some time.

Instead of rattling it off at least a half dozen times a year when an associate comes to his office with a question on a client, Gates of **Gates, Wise, Schlosser & Goebel** could simply point to it.

The quote—"I don't want a lawyer who tells me what I can't do. I hire a lawyer to tell me how I can do what I want to do"—could be viewed as a pejorative statement against lawyers.

To Gates, however, it's more of a road-map he's tried to follow. He's used it from his early days at Northern Illinois University College of Law to today, as he represents small business owners who have ideas but simply need direction.

"That's sort of the theme from the beginning to the end of what I do," Gates says. "I don't come up with the ideas, but I'm pretty good at telling people that's a great idea, now let me tell you how to make this happen in a way that is within the legal bounds."

Learning from His Father

Gates, 53, was born in Chicago Heights in 1961. He was raised in Sterling, just over 50 miles southwest of Rockford near Interstate 88.

His father, Carl, worked for a number of manufacturing companies growing up, but left the industry when Gates was a preteen to become a professor of business and economics at Sauk Valley Community College. His mother, Nancy, worked as a nurse before also transitioning to a teaching career.

It was his father's connection to small business that helped shape his practice of representing small- and medium-sized companies needing legal assistance in commercial or real estate matters.

From his teen years, Gates remembers sitting in the back of his father's classroom and listening to him lecture about small businesses. He also helped his father grade papers at home. His father owned a number of small businesses around Sterling, where Gates worked as a teen.

"We learned the value of the small business way back when, and 30 years later it's what I do today," he says.

After high school, Gates enrolled in the University of Iowa and earned a degree in economics. He knew early on he wanted to become a lawyer. In fact, that was one of three options his father offered his three sons.

"We had three choices: an engineer, an accountant or a lawyer," Gates says. "I tried calculus, and it wasn't for me. My father did that because he was a very practical guy. Those professions, to him, were where you needed to

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be to support yourself.”

Gates says he chose Northern Illinois because the University of Iowa wanted him to pay out-of-state tuition, and Northern Illinois was a start-up law school with a practical approach to law. The school had brought in lawyers from the East Coast who Gates says showed him the ins and outs of being a lawyer.

During the summers in DeKalb, he clerked with the husband-and-wife law firm of Tupy & Tupy. Claude Tupy was a former contractor, and Janice Tupy was a former pharmacist. The duo taught him the same practical approach he was learning in law school, Gates says.

“Northern Illinois University really was a unique place to be even though it wasn’t that well known,” Gates says. “Everyone there was re-inventing what a law school was. Their focus was to try and create lawyers, as opposed to just teaching you to think like a lawyer.”

Settling in Springfield

After graduating from NIU *cum laude*, Gates had several criteria for where he wanted to work. They ultimately led him to Springfield, a town he hasn’t left since 1986.

He wanted to live in a community in the Midwest with more than 100,000 people and be near a lake where he could water ski. His choices were Springfield; Madison, Wis.; the Quad Cities; and Peoria. After interviewing in Springfield with Bud Potter of Londrigan, Potter and Randle P.C., his choice was clear.

“Potter was a kindred spirit in the sense he had a lot of bare knuckle to him,” Gates says. “He cusses like a sailor and has a larger than life personality, but it was very clear to me he had a very pragmatic approach to law.”

Potter says he saw that pragmatic approach with Gates early on while he worked on a number of corporate transactions the firm handled. He says one of Gates’ biggest strengths is his ability to read clients and make sure they understand what the problem is.

“You have to give advice on how to get it done, not what you can’t do,” Potter says. “(Gates) never forgets that.”

Gates was thrown into the fire early on, handling a massive lawsuit brought by local electrical cooperatives accusing Illinois Power Co. of mismanaging construction of the Clinton nuclear power plant. Londrigan, Potter and Randle represented the co-ops in the suit, and Gates was in charge of holding press conferences at the Illinois statehouse and speaking at town hall meetings across the state.

The suit dragged on for at least four years. Gates remembers near the end of the suit that he was writing an appellate brief in the hospital as his wife, Kristine, was giving birth to their first child, Max.

The sleepless nights and countless hours spent on the case don’t conjure up the best memories, but Gates learned a valuable lesson from Tom Londrigan during that time.

“The biggest thing I learned from (Londrigan) is never, ever give up,” he says.

While at the Springfield law firm—located across the street from his current office at 1231 S. Eighth St.—Gates handled a variety

of cases, but mostly stuck with small business owners who needed a lawyer for advice to grow their business.

Gates was one of the lawyers for what was then a small movie theater business in central Illinois, Kerasotes Showplace Theaters. Potter, Craig Randle and he helped Kerasotes expand their business by handling real estate transactions, zoning and corporate governance issues, among other things. The company flourished and was later sold to AMC Entertainment in 2010 for \$275 million, according to news reports.

One of his most cherished clients that Gates started with from the beginning was Midwest Cellular, a cell phone and accessory store with 50 locations in three states. Gates says working with the owners, Fred and Tammy McAfee, to grow their business epitomizes why he became a lawyer in the first place. The couple started out with an idea but needed direction from a lawyer about how to make that vision become a reality.

There were many times working with the McAfees over two decades that he relied on the JP Morgan quote, he says.

“I feel like even though I don’t own (the company), they count on me for a key component of their success,” Gates says. “It’s just a pleasure to be able to be part of what they’ve done.”

Fred McAfee says Gates was a key in helping the business thrive. The McAfees started in 1993 with one location in Springfield. Gates helped work out leases with building owners, handle labor situations, and negotiate agreements with the phone provider AT&T in order for Midwest to sell the service in their stores.

Over the years, McAfee says, he has appreciated Gates’ approach to helping his business. McAfee views him as a business partner rather than legal counsel.

“He is an efficient attorney,” McAfee says. “He gets to the point and his personality is direct. That’s good for a business owner. I don’t have to ask a lot of questions. He gets to the point and focuses on ‘What do you want to do?’”

Working on divorce cases was sometimes more challenging for Gates. He cringes to this day when recalling certain ones from his time at Londrigan, Potter and Randle. Potter was able to view divorces more as a business arrangement, but it wasn’t that easy for Gates.

The people he represented were successful in their professional lives, but could barely muster rational and logical thoughts while sitting at the negotiating table, fighting over things as inconsequential as Tupperware, he says.

For someone called a pragmatist by friends and family, divorce cases weren’t suited for him.

“That’s a classic line I use all the time because it happened all the time,” Gates says. “It was just very hard for me to deal with someone who knew that Tupperware was worth \$5 and knew that he had tens of thousands in cash and could buy his own Tupperware.

“Why are you making decisions that are clearly vindictive as opposed to rational?”

Starting His Own Firm

After 12 years at Londrigan, Potter and Randle, Gates left the firm to start his own practice



Gates’ passion for waterskiing keeps him young.

in 1997 with Peter Wise and Fred Schlosser. It was one of the most difficult decisions he ever had to make, but it could have been harder if Potter wasn’t so accommodating.

Rather than fight to keep clients, he says, Potter allowed him to take the clients he worked with, even sending out a letter to the clients to let them know it was OK to go with Gates.

“It was really hard emotionally because (Potter) was such a good friend and mentor,” Gates says. “But the biggest reason I left was because that firm was always going to be Bud Potter’s firm. He’s 73 years old, and it still is. I wanted my own.”

Potter says it would have been a lose-lose situation for both parties trying to salvage clients, although he did make it known he still wanted their business.

“It becomes acrimonious and nobody wins,” Potter says. “We said you guys tell us what you want to do, and we’ll honor that wish.”

While struggling with the decision, Gates says, he also talked with his uncle about his fears of opening up his firm and not having the comfort of a guaranteed paycheck. His uncle’s advice cemented his view that breaking away was the right decision.

“His comment was, ‘You have it completely ass backwards,’” Gates says. “‘The only way you can have a job with certainty is if you are your own boss.’ That was a huge thing for me to realize. He is absolutely right.”

Over the past 17 years, Gates says, his practice has been able to thrive and never really had any lean years. The core clients that followed him to his new firm were his best advertisement and source of referrals. Other clients he represents include: Sangamo Construction, Joyner Development, Ryan Builders, Ace Sign Company, Arizona Tile and Phoenix Insulation.

Gates has two daughters, Ellyn, 23, and Anna, 19, as well as a 25-year-old son, Max. Both of his parents are still alive, and Gates has lived a healthy life. One thing that keeps him young is a passion for water skiing. If he can, he sneaks out of work around lunch and to water ski on Lake Springfield for 90 minutes before heading back to the office.

His partners even let him keep his boat in a shed behind the office, making sneaking out more practical. Not surprising for the ever-practical lawyer.

“My older brother refers to me as the pragmatist. Everything I do, like it or not, is practical and logical.” ■