

Jim and Maryjo Pirages of Hinshaw & Culbertson, HolmstromKennedy



From left: Maryjo Pirages, Jim Pirages

By Elizabeth Davies

ROCKFORD — When Maryjo F. Pirages looks at her father, she sees commitment, compassion and a moral compass after which she wants to model her career and life.

That's why, in many ways, she is so much like her father. Both are community leaders, volunteering for groups such as Transform Rockford, which works to improve quality of life in their community. Their homes are a mere seven minutes apart, and their law offices are only seven-tenths of a mile apart.

Maryjo was raised to choose her own path, and she did. But her admiration for her dad runs deep. It turned out that she wanted a path that looked very similar to his.

"He laid some pretty big footsteps for me to follow," she says affectionately.

Today, James R. Pirages handles labor and employment law on behalf of management for one of Rockford's dominant downtown law firms, **Hinshaw & Culbertson,**

LLC, just as he has since Maryjo was six months old. His daughter, meanwhile, returned to Rockford after law school to take a job — also in employment law — just a few blocks away with competing firm **HolmstromKennedyPC.**

Their unique last name, combined with the similar firm names, has made for some confusion. For example, despite being 30 years his junior, Maryjo has been mistaken for his wife. On another occasion, his name was incorrectly published alongside her firm's name.

But for those who know them, the Pirages are making a distinct and unmistakable impression on the city in which they live. Their dedication to helping others reaches far beyond the scope of their legal work, as they press toward excellence in volunteerism as well.

Becoming a Family of Lawyers

Like Maryjo, Jim Pirages' youngest son, a college junior, is planning to go on to law school. It's a trend that

has the rest of the family joking: Surely, there must be a defective gene somewhere for their family of five to turn out three lawyers.

As it happens, the family's legal history runs deeper than that. Maryjo's great-great maternal uncle, Anthony Ingrassia, was the first Italian-American lawyer in Rockford. And by sheer coincidence, he represented Jim's grandmother and her siblings in an estate dispute. The case went all the way to the Illinois Supreme Court in 1949. Jim uncovered that information during law school at Southern Illinois University — years before he ever met Maryjo's mother.

Jim pursued a legal career after studying history at Rockford College and working at a law office during school breaks. With a servant's attitude, he chose law as a way to help people.

"I saw law as an interesting, honorable profession," he says. "It was something that fit well with my personality."

Maryjo didn't initially set out to be a lawyer. Through a child's eyes, she saw that her dad's job as a lawyer meant that he put in a lot of hours and talked on the phone a lot. And so, with a love for children, she planned on becoming a pediatrician.

But over time, she began to realize that her strengths were writing and communication, not math and science. Then one day, she sat in on a medical malpractice deposition that made her dad's job seem quite ap-

pealing.

"My dad has the hardest work ethic of anyone I know. What I really saw was a dedication to serve — both his clients and his community," she says. "Seeing his people skills and his ability to be a leader in the community really influenced me."

As she dabbled professionally in different practice areas, she found herself drawn to her dad's field of employment law. She particularly enjoys the client counseling angle of employment law.

"I realized that what my dad does is really pretty interesting," she grins.

After law school at the University of Illinois, Maryjo set her sights on returning to her hometown. She was chided by some of her classmates, who couldn't believe she would choose to work in Rockford, a mid-sized city often noted for its high unemployment figures. In reality, she says, "Rockford is in the best place it's been in my lifetime."

And that's in no small part because of her father. Jim was involved in establishing Davis Park, a popular concert and festival venue in downtown Rockford. Maryjo remembers her mother driving past Davis Park when she was a child, saying, "That's daddy's park!"

Maintaining Legal Careers

Now, both Maryjo and Jim work very close to "daddy's park." They are nestled in the city's growing and vibrant downtown, and they meet for lunch regularly.

For the most part, Maryjo relies on her growing ex-

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expertise and her firm's mentors for everyday details. But she continues to turn to her father for "big picture" advice. She chose to work for a competing firm in part because her father's firm frowns on hiring family members.

"Obviously, I would love to learn from my dad, but it's good to forge my own way," she says, adding that she still manages to get "little tidbits of practical advice" from dad.

"There are ethical boundaries we can't cross, but we go through hypothetical situations pretty well," he says.

The professional lesson he's most wanted her to understand is the responsibility lawyers hold when clients offer them their cases — and their trust.

"We are blessed to be in a profession where people rely on us for advice, so be responsive to your clients," he says.

Following her graduation from law school, Maryjo lived in her parents' Rockford home while saving for a house. Having such a close daily proximity to her dad certainly had its benefits.

"It was comforting to me to be able to draw from his expertise and observe his style and habits while beginning my own practice," she says.

Still, watching his daughter move into her own house last year — and establish her own career at another law firm — has been valuable, Jim Pirages says.

"Allowing Maryjo to go

out and forge her own way, make her own reputation, while having the support of her parents, it's been a good thing," he explains. "It's gratifying to see her grow."

Just twice have the Pirages, who both practice employment law, found themselves on opposite sides of a case.

"We've had occasions where I was representing a company and her firm represented the terminated employee," Jim says.

Both were routine transactions where client consent was obtained. Maryjo says she would be quick to recuse herself from a more complicated case if her father represented the other party.

Still, his influence shows itself in her work. She has watched her father's professional style over the years and tries to be like him in three key ways: good listening skills, helping parties find common ground, and staying results-oriented. She appreciates her father's cool head in difficult situations.

"You try to be respectful and you try to be responsive," Jim says. "Not that you can't be aggressive when need be, but that's not where I like to start."

Maryjo also has watched her father's firm loyalty — he has been at Hinshaw & Culbertson for nearly 30 years — and taken it to heart.

"That's the mindset I had when I joined my firm, that this could be my entire career," she says.

Giving Back to the Community

Maryjo easily remembers her father leading key community groups when she was young. He previously served as president of the Rockford Chamber of Commerce, the Rockford Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, and the Community Foundation of Northern Illinois. He serves on the fundraising arm of Rock Valley, the local junior college that he once attended. In 2011, he was a finalist for the community's top volunteer honor, the Excalibur Award.

"He taught me to always remember to give back to others," Maryjo says of her father. "He's a behind-the-scenes, get-your-hands-dirty rock star. We were used to that as a norm, but now I realize what a sacrifice that was."

It's simply part of the Pirages DNA to be active volunteers, however. Maryjo is a Big Sister, serves on the board of Crime Stoppers, and works with the Community Foundation of Northern Illinois and the Winnebago County Bar Association.

Together, Jim and Maryjo volunteer for Transform Rockford, which aims to make Rockford a more attractive place to live and work.

"I've benefitted a lot from living in this community, and it's important to give back," he says.

It also makes him a better lawyer. Particularly working in employment law — including with terminated

employees, OSHA citations and other employment-related disputes — getting out of his comfort zone as a volunteer gives him a professional insight into other points of view.

"Community involvement gives me a better perspective on people who face challenges I don't face," he says. "That gives me a certain amount of empathy when counseling clients."

As she moves into a new stage of life — as an experienced lawyer, homeowner and new bride — Maryjo is thankful that, while her dad left big footsteps for her to fill, he also gave her the tools to fill them.

"Yes, it's important to be a good lawyer and a good advocate for your clients," Maryjo says. "But at the end of the day, it's most important to be a good person."