

A good fit: Married in life and the practice of law

Lawyer couples reveal what it takes to work together and stay married.

By Tami Kamin-Meyer

When Norman Pine, a Sherman Oaks plaintiff's attorney specializing in appellate litigation, wants to speak with his partner, he does not even have to pick up the phone. In fact, he doesn't even need to get up from his desk. That's because Beverly, his wife of nearly 22 years, is both his life and business partner in their boutique law practice, established in 1994.



Plaintiff Appellate Attorneys Norman and Beverly Pine

Perhaps it is fitting the Pines are partners in life and in law because it was the practice of law that led to their initial meeting in 1984 when Beverly was hired by the Los Angeles firm where Norman already worked. At the time, Beverly was the divorced mother of two young children, so "he must have thought I was safe to be friends with," she says. Not too long after meeting, the firm had them collaborate on what Beverly says was an "enormous" anti-trust case. That partnership proved successful, "so we knew we worked well together," she says.

When Norman moved on to another firm in 1990, Beverly also left their original workplace to practice law for another lawyer. The firm Norman had joined toiled in defense work, and after four years there, he realized "his heart wasn't there," says Beverly. When he went out on his own as an appellate attorney for plaintiffs in 1994, Beverly suggested they work together on a few contracted legal matters.

"Then I decided to join him and open our own practice. We bought furniture and got letterhead," she recalls. They rented an office in the same building that housed the firm Norman had just left because "we got a lot of referrals." Soon, they relocated Pine and Pine to its current location, one-half mile from their Sherman Oaks home.

"We go home and eat lunch with our yellow lab, Misty," Beverly says.

Phil Bourdette, 64, a Visalia plaintiff lawyer who has practiced law with wife Miriam, since 1990, shares a similar experience. According to Phil, the greatest impact working alongside Miriam has had on his career is that "at the end of the day, when we go home at night, we don't have to say, 'How was your day, honey?'"

While for some, practicing law with a spouse would be unthinkable, numerous California couples are engaged in that duality. While litigating duos like the Pines and the Bourdettes are certainly in the minority, they aren't the state's only plaintiff practitioners who are partners both in life and the law.

How can they work with their spouse?

It's probably no surprise that several of the married couples practicing plaintiffs' law together in California have their own set of strategies for successfully navigating the inherent challenges wrought by spouses working together. It's also just as plausible that many readers of this article are asking themselves not only *how* married lawyers practice law together but also *why* they would choose to do so.

Despite not being members of the same firm any longer, San Francisco attorneys John and Cynthia McGuinn continue to co-counsel certain plaintiff



Cynthia and John McGuinn

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matters. According to John, one rule of thumb the couple believes is intrinsic to their ability to collaborate together, both in law and life is "recognizing the importance of space away from the law together." Each also pursues his or her own interests in the extremely limited free time available to do so.

Another strategy the McGuinns utilize when co-litigating a case is that if either person feels strongly about something relating to a matter at hand, "the other stops to consider" their spouse's viewpoint, says Cynthia. She labels that approach the couple's "unspoken deal."

According to Del Mar plaintiff's lawyer, Jennifer Lutz, who has been married to her law partner Greg for nine years, the couple is so busy they rarely spend time together during the workday. It was by sheer serendipity that it was possible to interview the Lutzes over Jennifer's cell phone speaker as the pair drove together to a court hearing. "It's a rarity for us to be driving together," says Jennifer.

Not only are they law partners, the Lutzes are also raising five children, whose ages range from 17 to three-year-old twins. "Our free time is spent going to dance recitals, a lot of baseball games," says Jennifer, who, at 39, is ten years younger than her husband.

So just how do they manage to cope with the stress and responsibilities associated with overseeing a burgeoning law practice and an active home life?

"Misery loves company," jokes Greg.

Whereas everyday stress can overwhelm any couple, adding a client's contentious legal matter to the mix can spell disaster for the legal eagles. However, according to Jennifer, when a case becomes that intense, she and Greg have successfully resolved issues in what may be considered a surprising way. "Contentiousness helps us work together because we want to smooth it over and get it right for our clients," she says.

Over the years, the delicate balance between home and work life has blurred into one universe for Norman and Beverly Pine. They have little issue with discussing work-related matters at almost any time or place, whether at the office, at home or even on vacation. "We talk work wherever we are. There may be times when we say, 'Let's not talk about

Psychologist takes a dim view of marriage-business partnership

When plaintiffs' attorneys practice law with their spouses, the risk that both ventures will fail is high, says Dr. Paul S.D. Berg, an Oakland psychologist with 46 years of experience.


Berg

"When I meet couples in real life who say it's [working together] working fine, I'm astounded," says Berg. That's because merging marriage with business "adds incredible stress" to a relationship, he explains.

In addition to specializing in forensic psychology, homicide and child sex cases, and employment-related matters, Berg is also a licensed marriage and family relationships' therapist who has counseled several married couples who are also partners in business. In the nearly five decades he has been a psychologist, Berg has heard countless stories about marriages gone wrong, lives ruined by alcohol and drugs, and families torn apart by sometimes unimaginable circumstances.

While he certainly does not sound the death knell for marriages where the couple also works together, he says wedlock and work can be the basis for a toxic cocktail.

Couples who hope to or are successfully united both in marriage and career share a unique characteristic with one another, says Berg. They understand "loving each other does not require 24-hour togetherness. It's important to have time separate from each other so when they come together, they are refreshed."

What's law got to do with it?

Married couples practicing law together face pressures inherent to that particular situation. For example, since the practice of law is often adversarial, Berg says he "doesn't know how couples can avoid some competitiveness when they work in similar surroundings."

A truism for nearly every legal eagle is that toiling in the profession is stressful. Compounding the difficulties inherent in the day-to-day realities of being a plaintiff's lawyer is that the profession is naturally competitive, time consuming, and, often, emotionally draining. Many marriages implode when the demands, responsibilities and emotions involved with working alongside a spouse are added to the fray.

Fortunately, however, there are positive steps married law partners can take to strengthen their marital bond, despite the obstacles. For those couples already practicing plaintiff law together, Berg offers these suggestions:

- Find a creative way for each lawyer to carve time out of their work schedules to spend quality time with their spouse/law partner;
- Develop a sub-specialty within the realm of plaintiff law so neither partner is a clone of the other;
- Schedule time to enjoy individual interests, separate and apart from one another;
- Be sensitive to the additional stresses put on their personal lives by practicing law together; and
- Seek counseling, as needed.

For those married attorneys currently contemplating merging their profession with their life partner, Berg suggests, "Think twice."

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work right now,' but we generally speak about work [wherever]. Our clients have our attention 24/7," explains Norman.

Based on his experience, Norman has distinct suggestions for married couples considering practicing plaintiff law together. He says he would offer married lawyers pondering the unification of their work and private lives "the same advice I'd give them if they were thinking about being bridge partners. You need to know yourself and your spouse to determine if you have the right fit, strong mutual respect, a history of consensus and an understanding of the major parts of your spouse's life."

Why would they want to?

Despite the added stress likely placed on a marriage when couples practice plaintiffs' law together, Greg Lutz spoke glowingly about his situation.

"The best part of working with my spouse is our sense of companionship. You also don't have to worry you're going to get screwed by your partner," he says.

John McGuinn was equally as effusive. He enjoys practicing law alongside wife Cynthia because it instills "confidence that someone with great insight and highly respected in the legal profession" is alongside for support, advice and, yes, even constructive criticism.

"If the fit is there, you get tremendous benefits" from toiling in the trenches of a law practice with a spouse, says Norman. For him, working alongside his wife of 22 years has "made everything work better. She is so incredibly smart and wise," he says.

For her part, Beverly says practicing law with Norman has taught her a lesson she had not anticipated before they first embarked on their joint law practice. "It makes it so much easier to be married to a lawyer" because each understands the time commitment required to be successful in the profession.

Beverly says she is also proud of the law practice she and Norman have developed over the years. "Sometimes we pinch ourselves because we built this from nothing, together. We're doing well, are known in our field, and there's a certain 'wow' factor to that," she says.

Miriam Bourdette says she enjoys practicing law with husband Phil because "we have a shared mission and purpose, which is really the glue of our marriage." For Phil, the best part of working alongside Miriam is that he "gets to see a wonderful person every day."

Some free legal advice

It's not just married lawyers working together whose relationship would likely benefit from some time apart. Pursuing one's interests or hobbies separate from a life partner is usually an excellent method for retaining some individuality from their spouse.

For the Bourdettes, that means Miriam studiously reads magazines and cookbooks. She also mentors women and is active in women's caucuses while Phil is an active member of the American Association for Justice, the Consumer Attorneys of California and various Republican-related causes.

With all the demands of a full-time law practice coupled with a full-time home schedule, the Lutzes admit they have little time for themselves. However, says Greg, the couple try to pencil a 'date night' into their calendars, time permitting, of course.

Norman Pine describes himself as addicted to YouTube. "I can spend an hour on it at the drop of a hat," he says. The Pines enjoy live theater and love traveling to New York City to catch some shows on Broadway. "We love to travel and almost never travel apart," says Norman.

Meanwhile, though, it seems like the Pines traveling days will be in the distant future since, according to Beverly, her husband has no thoughts of retiring from the practice of appellate law. "This is who he is," she says. For her part, however, Beverly says her family's running joke is that when she turns 70, "I won't come to the office."

However, the slight giggle in her voice reveals her true intentions. "We want to see what else can be done."

Tami Kamin-Meyer is an Ohio attorney and a freelance writer and editor. Her byline has appeared in Better Homes and Gardens, Ohio Lawyer, *and* Ohio Lawyers Weekly. *In 2007, she was the Ohio correspondent for www.legalnewsline.com. Kamin-Meyer also penned a study guide about filing personal bankruptcy published by Quamut, a division of Barnes and Noble.*

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