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THAD WOODY

PRACTICE PROFILE OF THE MONTH



SERIES

FAMILY LAW ATTORNEYS MUST LOOK AT THE BIG PICTURE

It's not about winning when you're talking about family law, says Thad F. Woody, a partner with Kessler & Solomiany, which specializes in that dicey, difficult, often damaging divorce world. "What does winning even mean to a family? If there are kids, you want them well adjusted; if there are parents or in-laws, you want to be able to continue to talk to them. A family needs to stay intact somewhat when children are involved."

Being a family law attorney thus also means being a little bit of a therapist. "We enter that role often," he says, "but we also have a list of great therapists (to offer clients)." Too often, he notes, clients are focused on bank accounts, real property or retirement. "They forget the big picture. As the attorney, we can't get caught up in the emotion. Clients

may think of winning in terms of dollars or custody (of children), but it's not necessarily what will make them happy. It's important that attorneys provide realistic expectations."

That can prove to be challenging. "Clients are malleable. They change under the influence of family and friends. But it is imperative to provide counsel from day one," adds Woody who says in family law, all cases are unique and unusual, ensuring that the facts of each case "stick with you."

Certainly that's true in Kessler & Solomiany's caseload. Among the high-profile executives, celebrities and athletes who are clients of the firm, are the women from the TV series, "Real Housewives of Atlanta." Through the years, the women may have changed, but the issues they bring to Woody and his partners remain the same: divorce

and pre-nuptial agreements. Other clients come from the sports arena or music world, especially now that the hip-hop and film industry have blossomed in Atlanta.

"You don't have to live in Atlanta to find love in Atlanta, have children, marriages and divorces here," notes Woody.

"Atlanta has grown as a city and we have a huge entertainment area as well as many high-profile executives. What's different with these clients is that they have a larger spotlight on them. We hear all kinds of interesting things that get repeated in the media. A lot of people know these clients and there's always a risk of gossip. We enter confidentiality orders and seal the dockets, but things still leak and we try to protect our clients."

The fact that Woody is now in a position to protect his clients from the media is iron-

ic since when he was in college at the University of North Carolina, he was deciding whether to make a career in journalism or in law. “When I studied journalism, it was evolving from substantive reporting and writing to sensationalism and faster deadlines,” recalls Woody who lunches occasionally with college friends at CNN which is headquartered across the street from his downtown office. “We have the same deadlines with family law, but the idea of serving a client is much more appealing than serving a news agency. I try to keep my clients out of the news.”

“Whether our clients are red-carpet regulars or full-time parents, they get the same type of high-end representation.”

What is similar to journalism, however, is its time demands. “It’s challenging because of the constant 24/7ness of it all now. With the technology we all have, we’re accessible to our clients – and they’re most available on weekends, nights and holidays. I try to give counsel at all times, but sometimes I regret that I missed out on the days of practicing law with only a typewriter and a landline which also afforded attorneys in that era to more easily disengage from the practice when leaving the office. I would not want to give up my technology now but I do think attorneys and clients need to be

more mindful of life in front of them and how they engage with people personally to have more meaningful relationships. In the divorce context, it is easy to be obstinate and hide behind a keyboard but sometimes those quick words can have a chilling effect on the final outcome of a divorce and also carry with a family for years to come. Two summers ago, I went with some law school friends to rural Sweden and it was the first time without cell phone signals for three days. It was delightful.”

Yet, helping people in their time of need is also what attracts Woody to family law.

“There’s a feel-good component to helping people,” he admits. However, he stresses that “patience,” “a good basis in the law,” and “kindness” are the most important qualities for practicing family law. “Kindness is probably unusual for a family lawyer to say, but being kind to an opposing lawyer helps later in your career. It’s important to be professional rather than smear into someone’s face when you’re proven right.”

Two words come to Marvin L. Solomiany’s mind when he thinks about Woody: reliability and commitment. “Thad is one of those guys that you can always count on

his word, no matter what the circumstances may be. This applies to situations in and out of the office. In addition, his commitment to his cases is remarkable. Thad always zealously represents his clients, while at the same time making sure that he is committed to explaining to them the pros and cons of each particular decision that is applicable to his/her case.”

According to Randall M. Kessler, “Thad is an organized, perceptive and detail-oriented lawyer. But perhaps more important is his ability to communicate with his clients. He is responsive and his clients seem to always appreciate his ability to listen to them and to be there for him. As a former chair of the ABA (American Bar Association) Family Law Section, I am so happy that Thad has picked up the mantle.”

Indeed, Woody is active in the Atlanta Volunteer Lawyers Association and he teaches a family law course as adjunct professor at the Georgia State University College of Law. He charges that law schools, in general, don’t promote family law sufficiently. “I have guided students who think they want a desk job and some who dismissed family law, thinking it would be less fulfilling. The importance of family in the institution of law needs to be stressed,” he says. The advice he gives to law students boils down to being consistent and thorough. “Know what you’re going to say be-



fore you say it and know what the client will say before a judge. You must do due diligence and be prepared.”

Although Woody doesn't like grading exams, he says he loves the interaction with law students. “They come with a sense of optimism,” he smiles.

Kessler & Solomiany itself is a relatively young law firm, according to Woody, comprised of attorneys with diverse backgrounds. “This helps the client choose who they're most comfortable with. Some clients want someone yelling at them and some seek more collegial mechanisms. We have a very hard-working culture here. We get feedback from other attorneys, but at the same time, both Randy and Marvin allow us to develop our own styles,” explains Woody.

Woody has been with Kessler & Solomiany for nearly 10 years. “What interested me is that they represented high-profile and high-wealth clients which allows you to use and utilize different resources to provide the best possible outcome for the client. That's good for an attorney. We have different skill sets. Mediation and arbitration can replace litigation, which is attractive because clients can reach

their endings on their own versus with a court. Not everyone can afford that.”

It was litigation, however, that drew him to law, he admits. “We all enjoy going to court, but I do not think litigation is ever good for a client, especially in a family law context. Of course, in some instances we must go to court because the other side is obstinate, but most of the time it's emotion and people trying to be right and that doesn't get settled in court.”

“I see high-profile women and men executives who you would think would never shed a tear, cry. I see stay-at-home parents who are meek and who have taken emotional abuse and their anger outshines any other anger,” reflects Woody. “Humans are complicated animals and relationships compound that complication. In the end, each client just wants to be loved. And if they've been betrayed, they've lost a sense of trust. I hope I establish a sense of trust, but given that they might have been married 20 or 30 years, their trust is shaken.”

Even before Woody started practicing family law at Kessler & Solomiany, when he worked for a large Atlanta law firm with little client interaction, he says “friends and family came to me with questions about law. In law school at the University of North Carolina School of Law, I wanted family law, but where I grew up, people didn't think it was specialized enough to make a living.”

Woody grew up in the sleepy rural Great Smoky Mountains of North Carolina. Both parents were educators, with his mother working at the Department of Public Instruction and his father a high school civics teacher. “It was important for them that I, as their only child, would have a good education. In general, the area was not well educated, but it had a lot of smart people.”

Before jumping to the totally different world in Atlanta, Woody clerked for North Carolina Supreme Court Chief Justice Sarah Parker. “She had the biggest influence on me. She was the hardest worker and had a curiosity for the law and commitment to community. She was the only female member of the court then, and we were by far the hardest working chamber. The lights went on first in our chamber in the morning and the last to be turned off at night. We would never be accused of not being hard working.”

Although Parker retired at the mandatory age of 72 after being on the high bench for 21 years, Woody still stays in touch with her. “We meet yearly for a hike in the Smokies. She loves that part of the world and I enjoy sharing it with her and other friends because it offers so many great hikes and beautiful views and I know it well because I was raised there and still have family there.”

Woody's world has changed dramatically since his early days in North Carolina, and now he sees dramatic changes coming in the practice of family law. “Because of the June 2015 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Overgefell v. Hodges*, allowing same sex marriages throughout the country, attorneys in family law must be more accessible to LGBT clients. We now see clients who have been together for a long time and have accumulated many possessions, so they need pre-nup agreements before marriage. In general, we see more pre-nups now because people are waiting until later in life for marriage; they have separate assets. Also, clients have friends whose parents were divorced and they don't want to go through that themselves.”

Another change Woody sees coming in family law is a huge surge toward arbitration and mediation. In any case, “Whether our clients are red-carpet regulars or full-time parents, they get the same type of high-end representation,” he states.

AT A GLANCE

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Community/Civic Involvement

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- At-large Council Member, American Bar Association Family Law Section
- Co-Chair, CLE Committee of the American Bar Association Family Law Section
- Author, Family Law Advocate
- Membership Committee, Atlanta Commerce Club

Professional Awards

- Super Lawyer by Atlanta Magazine
- Rising Star by Atlanta Magazine
- Legal Elite by Georgia Trend Magazine
- 10 of 10 ranking on AVVO