

Practicing law just natural for members of Donati family

By Jonathan Devin

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The Donati Law Firm doesn't specialize in family law, but it is family-oriented. "People ask me all the time 'How do you do this?'" said Donald Donati, the 58-year-old partner and co-owner of the firm. "My wife is my law partner; I practice with my three children, and my daughter-in-law."

Donati's wife, Wanda, joined the firm in 1983. His stepson, Billy Ryan, and Ryan's wife, Alison, followed suit, as did son Robert Donati and daughter Ellen Donati.

The firm, which specializes in areas of employment, Social Security disability and worker compensation, also employs one lawyer who's not in the family.

"Sitting around the dinner table, Wanda and I talked about trials we were in, and the children just grew up in that environment," said Donati. "It was a natural thing for them to gravitate here. We did not push them."

Donald Donati, who graduated from law school at the University of Tennessee Knoxville, worked at Memphis Area Legal Services under its former director, A C Wharton, who is now Shelby County mayor. Donati opened his private practice in 1980 after Wharton moved on.

"I was one of those idealistic youngsters of the '60s who believed that we could and should change the world," Donati said. "It seemed like becoming a lawyer was a constructive and legal way to make change in society. I was moved by civil rights and anti-war lawyers I came in contact with."

The firm has been housed in a 7,500-square-foot office on Union Avenue in Midtown since 1999.

Donati and his family handle cases in which employees are laid off or denied disability claims. Each year the firm opens 750 to 1,000 new cases, Donati said, and he estimated that revenue has doubled in the last eight years.

"During hard times, employees are laid off or terminated without cause," he said. "During recessions, we prosper because recessions hit our clients hardest."

This year the firm added three paralegals, and a seventh lawyer who is fluent in Spanish will begin working in August. Donati said another lawyer may be hired in 2010.

Donati said age discrimination cases represent a growing area for the firm as Baby

Boomers get older.

Also this year, the firm opened a Veterans Administration section to take cases involving compensation for wartime veterans with disabilities acquired in combat.

"For the first time since the Civil War, Congress has allowed lawyers to make compensation for representing those people," Donati said.

The bulk of the firm's clients are in Memphis, but it also takes cases in Nashville; Jackson, Miss.; eastern Arkansas and northern Alabama.

Susan Pearce of Dixon, Tenn., west of Nashville, said the firm helped her through her first experience as a legal client. She was represented in an employment dispute which lasted almost a year.

"They explained everything in detail so that I would understand," Pearce said. "If you've ever talked to a lawyer, they use words that you don't understand, but (Billy Ryan) didn't do that with me."

The Donati law firm

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