

Family Law?

*Kay Snyder
Is All In.*

*By Char Hopela
Photos by Sue Dropp*



Kay, showing off one of her many interests

If you want exceptional representation in a family law matter, be truthful with Kay Snyder of Jeddelloh

Snyder, PA. This seasoned attorney demands honesty from her clients and, in return, works diligently on their behalf in divorce and custody disputes. Kay is straightforward in her belief that success in the courtroom is founded on clients being forthcoming and cooperative with their chosen counsel. Otherwise, "they're wasting their money and my time."

Kay demonstrates the same level of tenacity and skill when she volunteers her services. In 2005, she received the Seventh Judicial District Pro Bono Award for her commitment to the Central Minnesota Legal Services' Volunteer Attorney Program. Working within the court system is the center-point of Kay's career, her community volunteering, and even her retirement plans.

From her downtown St. Cloud office, Kay has a postcard view of the old courthouse. The room contains the usual framed diplomas, neat stacks of paperwork (and more paperwork), and an unexpected sock monkey collection. Kay's professional attire is also enlivened with colorful touches, often, semiprecious, stone pendants and rings. When complimented on a chunky peridot ring, Kay says it's just something she found at Sam's Club.

Humor is an important aspect of Kay's personality. "I think it's vital to have a sense of humor. It can put clients at ease," she explains. "In the St. Cloud legal community, we can have a sense of humor with each other when we're trying to settle cases. That oftentimes lightens the mood and increases the rapport you have with the other side."

Kay's sharp comedy sense came into play during a recent happy-hour gathering. Asked if this article was planned as the *CMW* cover story, Kay demurs, "Oh no, I'm going to be the centerfold." When laughter at the table dies down, she nixes the idea, saying no one would want to see such a display. At this, a man at a nearby table leans in. "This 52-year-old would like to see it."

Colleagues note Kay can also be formal and formidable. As a family law attorney with 26 years of experience, her clients count on her unflinching courtroom demeanor. Early in her career, Kay worked part-time as a public defender, and found it to be "an excellent learning experience." She has always been comfortable in a

courtroom, but notes, "If anyone says they never get nervous before an appearance, I don't think they're being truthful."

Highly contested proceedings can still make her nervous. "It can be nerve-wracking for attorneys when they don't have control over the outcome."

Asked to describe herself in a word, Kay settles on 'hyper-vigilant.' "I'm always concerned about doing a good job for people," she explains. "That can lead to those 3 a.m. wake-ups, staring at the ceiling, thinking about a case. As I've gotten more experienced, I do that less often."

Path to prosperity

A St. Cloud State University alumna, Kay went on to graduate from the Hamline University School of Law. Upon passing the bar in 1986, she spent nearly two years as a judicial law clerk for Stearns County judges. After gaining private practice experience, she became law partners with Paul Jeddelloh. Paul knew Kay as an "astute" colleague. "I thought she was superb, and I didn't want her on the other side. It made sense to be her business partner rather than her opponent."

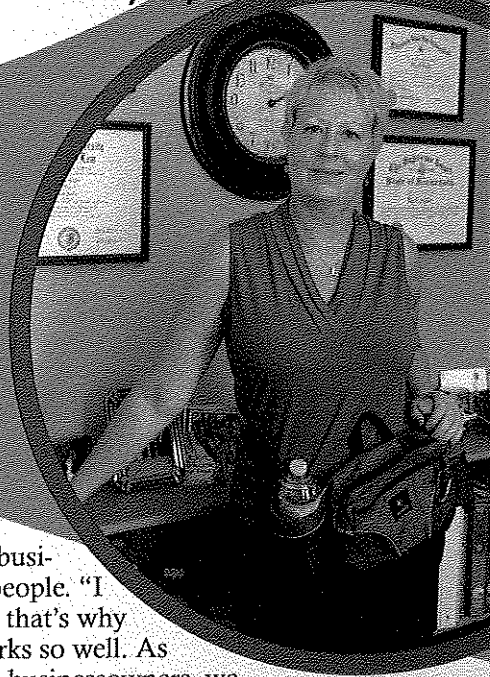
At the time, few women were named partners in local law firms.

Since its trail-blazing beginning, the partnership has prospered. The firm now includes three attorneys, four staff people, and offices in Big Lake, St. Cloud, and Cold Spring. In a typical week, Kay spends most of her time in St. Cloud, one day in Big Lake, and she travels, as-needed, to Cold Spring. Operating the trio of law offices enables Kay to serve clients in six counties. Referrals from former clients keep the firm busy. She considers word-of-mouth the best advertising, as evidenced by her firm's growth, despite increased competition from newcomers.

"It's challenging for anyone going into law right now. The Twin Cities has four law schools. There are a lot of new graduates, and the job market is pretty tight. I would encourage anyone going into the career to look at how they would distinguish themselves. I wouldn't discourage anyone, but be realistic about the job market."

Challenges and rewards

Kay entered the law field hoping "never to be bored on the job." Family law fit the bill, but required skills beyond her classroom training. Kay soon discovered she needed to offer a blend of legal and emotional support to clients, and hone her



“ability to interact with people undergoing a range of emotions.”

“That was a skill-set I had to develop,” Kay says. “In family law, you are dealing with people whose marriages are falling apart...custody issues. They’re concerned about their financial situation. I’ve learned to actively listen and empathize with people.”

Kay believes more real-life experiences with clients in law school settings are essential to preparing young attorneys for interpersonal interactions. “Unfortunately, that’s one thing law school does not prepare one for,” Kay says.

“I think recognizing people’s emotions and dealing with them in a professional manner is a huge part of any attorney’s job, in any aspect of law. When you interact with people,

you need to be sensitive to what they’re experiencing,” Kay continues.

Recognizing the limits to one’s expertise is important, too. “We are counselors. I consider that part of my job, but it does get to the point where I have to tell people, as gently as possible, these may be things they need to discuss with a therapist, because I’m not qualified.”

At home, Kay can relax — and sometimes commiserate — with Steve, her significant other of 21 years. The pair met through a mutual friend, and found common ground as indepen-

dent businesspeople. “I think that’s why it works so well. As small businessowners, we understand the ups and downs. We can be supportive of each other,” Kay says.


When asked if her marital status is due to having seen her share of family law upsets, Kay laughs. “I don’t have any preconceived notions about marriage, in general. I’m fully aware of the fact that I only see marriages that fail.”

Kay takes stock of numerous friends and family members who have successful unions, including her parents, who enjoyed a 55-year marriage. At the core of mutual contentment is a pairing of two happy individuals.

Kay balances a demanding job with stress-relieving activities, such as yoga, tennis, and other forms of exercise. She and Steve love hiking together. “We love traveling. That’s our favorite hobby. Anywhere we travel, we check out the hiking trails. Beautiful hiking in New Zealand,” Kay enthuses.

Decades of change
Since starting her law career in St. Cloud, Kay has seen a lot of changes. “Women are widely accepted now, which was not the case initially,” she says. Another positive development has been in shifting perceptions of men as equals in parenting. As a result, custody arrangements are now more fairly determined.

Kay also notes that, as the Internet

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has broadened access to information, more people are filing their own legal forms. For some, this works just fine, she notes. For those without children, real estate or retirement assets, filing for divorce can be a relatively simple matter. However, few people are quite so unencumbered, and it's concerning to her when serious legal matters are handled without professional guidance.

As an attorney, she is sometimes consulted after a divorce is final, when legal paperwork can be very difficult to undo. "People may not know the long-term ramifications of what they are doing," Kay says.

Kay finds advances in technology "marvelous," but is a voice of caution when it comes to social media. Unlike many of us, she doesn't have Facebook or Twitter accounts, and she's never posted a single selfie to the Internet. Kay notes that impulsive posts of private matters can have negative results in the courtroom, "especially in family law cases." She has experienced cases in which both sides have supplied their attorneys with unflattering online photos of the opposing party's activities. Kay advises people to consider the impact of their social media presence, and the content of their text messaging, as well.

Perhaps the ultimate sign of career satisfaction is imagining retirement as an opportunity to assume a new role in a familiar setting. Kay loves her practice, but acknowledges, "We all daydream about having a different job. In retirement, I see myself learning Spanish to a degree where I could be a court interpreter. I like the court system. We have a large Hispanic community in St. Cloud, and I've thought about pursuing that."

After taking a community education course in conversational Spanish, Kay decided she loved the language. But her love for legal work has not waned. "I find my profession very rewarding. I've met very interesting, unique people along the way. I am truly happy to be serving people in this capacity."



Char Hopela is a freelance writer with fresh technology skills and experience in print, broadcast, and new media.

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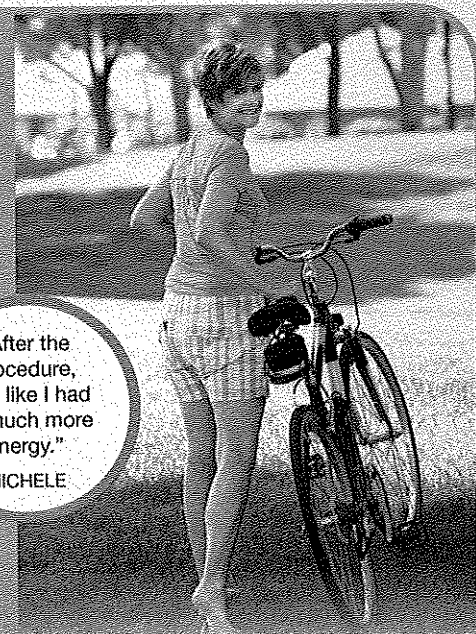
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