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First row, from left: Laura G. Alcott, Jon A. Dorf, Jonathan B. Nelson Second row, from left: Tina LeBrun, Abigail Rodriguez, Maria Paul, Colette Macan Third row, from left: Marilyn S. Goerler, Ralph N. Gaboury, Paul B. Bercovici

The firm

Jon Dorf grows a Hall of Fame business

MARY SUE IAROCCI

When Jon Dorf founded his law firm on April 1, 1992, he received some interesting phone calls from law school classmates, friends and family.

“Since the announcement was dated April 1, they thought it was a wonderful April Fools joke,” said Dorf, founder of The Dorf Law Firm L.L.P. in Mamaroneck. “It took me several years to persuade them that wasn’t the case, but that’s how my illustrious career began.”

Dorf’s firm is the winner of the 2009 Business Hall of Fame Award for small business success by The Business Council of Westchester.

“What we hear from Jon’s clients on consistent basis is that The Dorf Law Firm is so effective because of their ability to achieve results by interweaving ‘real world business principles’ with the law,” said Marsha Gordon, president and CEO of The Business Council. “Additionally, Jon has not only diversified the law firm practice areas, but has significantly increased the firm’s size from one individual to 13 individuals with seven of the attorneys proficient in diverse practice areas.”

When he graduated from Union University’s Albany Law School in 1990, “We were in the middle of a serious recession –” the so-called savings-and-loan recession “– that had a particularly harsh impact on the legal profession, so there were challenges to obtaining gainful employment.”

One day while jogging down Mamaroneck Avenue, Dorf came across office space for lease.

“When I started my practice, part of my hesitation was I didn’t have a client – not one,” Dorf said. “I remember sitting down at the desk with my diploma on the wall and my phone in the far corner and realizing that after two days, the phone wasn’t ringing.”

Realizing that he had to be more proactive, Dorf enlisted in a program that affords indigent individuals legal representation.

“Over time, I built up my criminal defense practice while picking up a business client here and there and doing some licensing and trademark work, and the practice began to grow,” Dorf said. “As my private practice began to increase, my criminal defense work began to decrease.”

Dorf hired his first associate in 1994; the firm moved to Mamaroneck Town Center in 1997.

Since then, the firm has built a practice that’s divided into four parts:

- a commercial real estate division: “Since 2005 we’ve done approximately a half-a-billion dollars in commercial real estate transactional work”;
- a corporate business department: “We advise and counsel businesses, whether they’re starting a business as an entrepreneur or a large multi-million dollar businesses”;
- litigation “We represent several Fortune 500 companies, and we do complex commercial and civil litigation in federal, state and local courts”; and
- intellectual property: “We manage a wide variety of trademarks and help clients with brand protection and brand identification as well as handle licensing agreements.”

The bar of justice is only part of the story.

“For me, as an entrepreneur the small business success award is really exciting because it’s not a law award, it’s given to a business,” said Jonathan B. Nelson, who was made partner in the firm in January and heads up the litigation department. “It really tells us two things: that we are doing something right for ourselves; and in doing so, we’re doing something right for our clients.” Dorf believes that success goes hand and hand with understanding family values, as evidenced last year when the Westchester Women’s Bar Association honored Dorf with the family-friendly policy award (one of several awards recently bestowed upon the firm).

“Jon really believes that family comes first and he stands by that,” said associate Laura Alcott, whose area of specialization is commercial and residential real estate. “When I started here in 2005, I was coming back to work after a leave of absence for childbirth. Jon is a unique individual and employer because he did not focus on the amount of time that I had not been practicing law, but looked at my experience having spent some time raising my children and he saw that as experience of a different kind that could bring something to the table.”

For Dorf, winning the Hall of Fame award is as much a tribute to his firm as well as to his family – his parents, brothers, sisters-in-law, cousins, his wife Yvonne and two young daughters Brianny and Alexa.

“You can’t do it yourself, even if you have a red cape on,” Dorf said. “My own family has played a critical role in allowing me to make it to the next step.” As for the future of the firm, Dorf is a contrarian; he is adding staff and office space in the face of the economy.

“We’re building to serve our clients today, but we’re also building to serve our clients tomorrow,” Dorf said. “I think the future is bright, and I look forward to it.”