

SARAH KERR SEVERSON

Mixing Hands-On Business Counseling with Boys, Movies

by Amanda Robert



When some clients call estate planners, they think they're calling because their accountant told them to get a will or a trust.

But for Sarah Kerr Severson, 40, a partner at **Schiff Hardin LLP**, that's really just the starting point. Her practice ranges from estate and trust litigation to counseling multi-generational families on how to transfer their wealth and businesses.

She tackles a multitude of issues, including prenuptial agreements for a marrying child, guardianship for a person with a disability, creditor protection, and anything else that permeates the lives of her clients.

"A person who's really serving her client will look at the client's entire financial and personal landscape and diagnose which issues need to be addressed and which don't to plan for uncertainty for the future," she says.

"For example, a common question from unmarried persons is, 'If I'm single, why do I need an estate plan?' I'm fielding these questions

and rebuffing some of the assumptions people make as to what an estate plan accomplishes and why they should have one.

"If you toss on top of that the changing tax landscape, evolving business issues, special-needs family members, same-sex marriage issues, and retirement planning concerns, there is an ongoing opportunity to help people ensure their tax and non-tax life issues are managed well for them and for their heirs."

Joe Perrino, the CEO of Home Run Inn Pizza, a family business that started on Chicago's South Side in 1947, began working with Severson about a dozen years ago. He knew he needed to create an estate plan and prepare for an eventual business transition after watching his father ignore the importance of those issues.

"It took me a few years to get him to move off of his position and start moving stock out of his name and give up certain elements of control," Perrino says. "My transition was very quick. He

died when I was 36, and I became president. The way I want to go about it, I want to fade away."

Perrino and his family appreciate Severson because she brings a different level of energy and knows how to communicate with each member of his family. Every three years, she makes a presentation to the family and explains the operation of their business succession plan and estate plan. She reviews issues such as where money flows and what happens when a death occurs. She answers questions and creates a tremendous amount of transparency.

"It's a lot easier to do when you're living and not sick than when you're on your death bed," Perrino says. "It's inevitable that a parent is going to die, so instead of doing it in a crisis mode, we do it in a more positive, educational arena."

As CEO, Perrino, now 59, oversees nine restaurants and sells frozen pizzas in 26 states. He continues to call on Severson because she

understands his company and family and knows their history. He also recognizes that as a younger attorney, she can grow with the next generation.

“She brings an element—because of her background with multiple family businesses—of the good, the bad, and the ugly,” he says. “I think it’s important to have that expertise and the understanding of money, inheritance, and the fact that if you don’t work on it, you will follow the course of rags to riches and back to rags. She keeps us in that reality.”

Following Her Mother’s Example

Severson grew up in Iowa City, Iowa, as the second of three girls. Her father owned his own retail stores and some real estate, and her mother worked in the pediatric oncology ward at the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics.

Severson says her mother taught her at an early age to be determined and goal-oriented, yet sensitive. She also helped her realize what’s most important in life.

“She is a prime example of someone who is tough and strong and powerful, and yet also gentle and compassionate,” Severson says. “She demonstrated for me that those don’t have to be dichotomous concepts. You really can wrap all of those qualities into one person.”

She also learned the value of family, spending a lot of time with nearby grandparents, aunts, uncles, and more than 20 cousins. Her maternal grandmother served as another early role model, teaching her that she was capable of doing anything she wanted to do.

“The belief system that was instilled in me is show up, do your best, recognize and use your talents, and infuse goodness into the world,” she says. “It is what propels me to succeed and also carries me through more challenging times.”

Severson became interested in politics after seeing her grandmother serve as county supervisor and travel often to Washington, D.C. She attended the University of Iowa, studying political science and Spanish, and also working for a law firm. She saw the benefits of a law school education, and after graduation in 1995, she went to the Northwestern University School of Law.

She remembers her father asking her after she graduated and found herself “neck-deep in tuition debt” if the education alone was worth it. Her answer? Most definitely.

“I think law school trains people to think differently and to turn the prism on how they address different issues,” she says. “That, to me, was really useful. I learned a lot just by going to law school and learning to think differently.”

Severson initially planned to become an international business lawyer, but changed course after taking estate and gift tax and wills and trusts classes in law school. She also

secured a summer associate position at Schiff Hardin, where she further cultivated those interests.

She became attracted to the holistic, non-niche nature of the trusts and estates practice. She liked the idea of becoming a family counselor and helping clients through significant events in their lives, events such as births, deaths, marriages, or illnesses of family members.

“I’m able to do something for them that they’re not able to do for themselves, whether it’s deliver peace of mind by telling them, ‘Your plan is in place,’ or being instrumental in getting to peace of mind for them,” she says.

“At the end of the day, what brings me back to this desk is No. 1, the human element and the interplay between what is cosmetically a tax practice with human relationships, and No. 2, the variety of the work.”

Serving Up Soup to Nuts

Severson started her career at McDermott, Will & Emery LLP, where she gained a lot of experience in trust and estate litigation. She used that knowledge to also become more effective in the estate planning side of her practice.

“When you’re sitting down in isolation and

nuts” fashion. In helping families transition their business or work through a specific tax problem, she relates to them by not only being a good lawyer but also by being a good listener and advocate.

“I think about when I have a problem, who do I want to know about it?” she says. “It has little to do with where they went to college or what their GPA was. The attributes of those people who help me most, the special people in my life, are those with good judgment, those who are sensitive, those who are good listeners.

“And so my belief is that if you show up and offer those things in an authentic way, it could be a recipe for success. So far, that’s paid off. And if it didn’t, I don’t know if I’d be available to do this work.”

Severson also finds that the traditional route of studying business development or billing a certain number of hours doesn’t typically serve as a guide for her success. While the number of transactions a corporate lawyer has handled may be very significant to a corporation hiring outside counsel, the number of wills and trusts she has cranked out means less to her clients than delivery of sincere, comprehensive service.

“Quantitative data, such as numbers of



The family hikes through the Smoky Mountains in August 2011. From left: Joey, 6; Adam, 9; James, 11; and Severson.

preparing a document, it is helpful to bring to the drafting exercise a mindset of how this will be interpreted by other lawyers, by family members, and by courts,” she says. “That perspective enables me to spot issues and head off future problems.”

As her role evolved into more of a general adviser and counselor for different families, she began serving clients in more of a “soup to

transactions, certainly is not going to be the litmus test for how well I’m going to serve a particular client’s needs and particular family,” she says. “If my phone stops ringing, then I’ll know that my client service philosophy is not working or serving the clients well.”

Severson moved to Schiff Hardin in August 2010. She liked the size and the model of the firm and saw it as an ideal platform for her

clients, who consist mostly of family-owned businesses, middle-market entrepreneurs, and families. She recognized potential in the firm's private companies group, which she calls an interdisciplinary "cornucopia" of different lawyers and skill sets who all impact these unique clients.

She also appreciated Schiff Hardin's ability to "serve" rather than "product" its clients. Service starts with listening to clients and diagnosing their problems. "Producing" centers on drafting a will or a trust for clients and sending them on their way.

"Happy clients expect to be served," she says. "In today's age, when clients have access to an abundance of information on the Internet, they collect a lot of data on their own. What they want to know from their lawyer is how does this data impact me and what should I do?"

When Severson works with her clients, she knows they expect her to bring her judgment and expertise to the table. She listens to them and assesses whether or not they have a problem. And if they do have a problem, she gives them her recommendations about how to fix it and move forward. From her perspective, the process means more than simply handing clients a will or trust.

"Estate planning is an area of the law some lawyers gravitate toward because they really like analyzing the technical, the granular Internal Revenue Code sections," she says. "Clients should be able to expect that expertise from us. But there's an opportunity to go above and beyond tax planning and really connect the pieces of personal life to tax/financial life."

Matt Galo, a partner in the private companies group at Schiff Hardin, met Severson when they were classmates at the Northwestern University School of Law. He began working with her when they were summer associates at Schiff Hardin. Now, nearly 20 years later, they continue to band together on common clients.

He affirms that Severson really partners with those clients, acting as more than just their estate planner. She takes the role of their business counselor and collaborates with certified public accountants and other financial professionals to help them solve their problems.

"She really gets involved with her clients, and not just on an as-needed basis. She's a strong advocate for their interests," Galo says. "She's creative and energetic, and she really gets what clients are looking for in their outside advisers. She thinks big picture."

He adds that Severson inspires confidence in her clients, colleagues, and partners. She stands out for being not only savvy, but direct, and she makes work fun.

"She makes it an enjoyable experience for her clients," Galo says. "They clearly love working with her."

The Couple That Never Returned

When asked about her most memorable cases, Severson points to a simultaneous death case involving a married couple in their 40s who went away for a getaway weekend, but got into an accident and never returned.

She views the case, which is still pending after several years, as an example of how

self-proclaimed tomboy.

She also serves as the president of the Mark Morton Memorial Fund, a nonprofit organization that donates money to local charities that have missions to alleviate homelessness and hunger, provide education, and help children and women. She started as outside counsel to the



Severson and her three sons hike through the Loop.

preparedness can change the lives of many people. The couple never created an estate plan and thought they would eventually get around to it. Severson says, since they never had that chance, their loved ones are now facing the consequences.

"It's very natural to focus on the negative impact of the accident on that family, but it's also a perfect opportunity to encourage clients to examine their estate planning status quo, see how it can be improved upon or engage in planning," she says. "It really will make an enormous positive difference for your family."

Severson adds that as a result of her work, she regularly is reminded that money does not solve all problems. Circumstances outside of her clients' control, including the behavior of other people or unexpected events, can affect them and their lives. As a result, she advises clients to be true to themselves and pursue their own happiness.

"This career has helped me put my own priorities in place," she says. "At the end of the day, I have three healthy, happy little boys, and that's what I get to go home to every night. And I'm so grateful."

Severson and her husband, Brian, live with James, 11, Adam, 9, and Joey, 6, in Western Springs. Most of her life outside of work involves her boys' baseball, football, and basketball teams, which is more than OK with her. She's a

group and stepped into her leadership position more than 10 years ago. She calls that experience humbling and eye-opening, and intends to remain involved in its work.

And in the few hours Severson has left over, she practices bikram yoga and reads. She also admits her guiltiest pleasure—going to back-to-back movies at the theater.

"That is now a complete and total luxury," she says. "But if you said to me, 'Sarah, I can give you a day where you're not allowed to be with your kids and you're not allowed to work,' I'm going to a movie theater for sure. And I'm buying the popcorn."

For Severson, the greatest challenge is not having enough hours in the day. She strives to actively participate in the lives of her clients, and since their lives are not always predictable, she needs to be responsive and accountable to them whenever they need her.

She achieves balance by trusting herself to prioritize. She says that may mean some weeks her time becomes more lopsided in favor of work and other weeks it's more lopsided in favor of her family. As long as she loves what she's doing when she's doing it, she lets the rest of the pieces fall into place.

"I know there's a way to be happy in this profession," she says. "Show up, do what you love and do it in the way that feels right." ■