

Attorney hands down love of the law and of nature.

Title Annotation: Art Johnson's children follow his calling, just as he followed his father's;
Business
Date: Sep 28, 2003
Words: 1160
Publication: The Register-Guard (Eugene, OR)
ISSN: 0739-8557

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Lawyering runs through Art Johnson's family like the Long Tom River runs through a 145-acre parcel that he and his family are restoring to native wetlands off Franklin Road north of Eugene.

Johnson once worked in the law business of his father, H.V. Johnson - who began his practice back in the days when a lawyer didn't need to have a law degree.

Art Johnson says he learned a lot more from his father than an appreciation for the law. While he and two brothers became lawyers, they picked up a commitment to environmental conservation from the elder Johnson on their many camping and hunting trips, mountain climbing excursions and ski outings.

Naturally, Art Johnson set out to do the same with his family.

"We grew up on rivers," says Bern Johnson, a lawyer for Eugene-based Environmental Law Alliance Worldwide and one of Art Johnson's two sons. One of Art Johnson's daughters, Corrie Johnson Yackulic, is a Seattle lawyer doing the same work as her father. His second daughter, Andrea Johnson, is a partner in a Philadelphia Democratic political consulting firm.

"Some families, you see the kids reject the parents and go in the other direction," Bern Johnson says. "In our family, none of that happened. We all grew up with a lot of mutual respect. Everyone's opinion was valued. We ended up with the same values."

So it happened that Art Johnson, 75, finds himself practicing law with a son, Derek Johnson, and restoring a wetlands with his sons and grandchildren in his spare time.

Gaining shareholder status in the firm of Johnson, Clifton, Larson and Corson - one of the largest plaintiffs law firms in the state - was not a birthright for Derek Johnson. The firm specializes in personal injury, product liability, medical malpractice, workplace injuries, civil rights, environmental and public interest cases.

The firm works in the high-risk arena of David and Goliath, championing the case of the

little guy who is harmed by the multinational corporation, for example. The firm gets paid only when there is a settlement or a verdict in favor of the client.

"By definition, we are risk-takers," Art Johnson says. "Almost all our income is from contingency fees. If our client loses the case, there is no fee."

A successful law practice needs an internal chemistry of trust, competence and cooperation among the shareholders and employees, he says. When the firm expanded 15 years ago and sought two new lawyers, it was not a guarantee that Derek Johnson would be one of them just because of his last name.

"The choice is extremely important to the partners. It can tear at the seams. We are extremely dependent on each other. We try to prevent people from saying 'my case.' We share decisions on whether to take a case, how to try a case. We learn from each other all the time," Art Johnson says. "I look at it now, and it has been very successful. Derek does well with the other partners."

Don Corson, one of six current shareholders, said the firm's rules require all hiring decisions to be by consensus of the shareholders. Derek Johnson's hiring was no exception.

"I had heard about him before. He is very qualified. He is likeable, easy-going. Fit right in," Corson said. "Everyone had to feel comfortable, or it wouldn't have happened. They maintain a very professional relationship within the firm. You wouldn't know they are father and son."

Derek Johnson, 44, says he gravitated to the legal profession naturally. He recalls his father and grandfather talking about how the law provides important social benefits, how it levels the playing field. Neither his father nor his mother, Anita Johnson, pushed any of their children into the law, Derek Johnson said.

Instead, they led by example. Anita Johnson, a journalist, is involved in several nonprofit groups and is a contributing editor for Eugene Weekly.

"We have always had that orientation in my family, politically and everything else," he says.

Still, he admits it's a little amazing to realize where he has landed in his career - a prestigious law firm, handling cases that make a difference for individuals and for society.

"Art is a very acclaimed, highly respected, well-known attorney," he says. "It's really wonderful to be in a setting where it's a work relationship where you work on things you believe in. Sometimes you're working on really tough issues. We may disagree, and I may make a decision that doesn't work out as well as we hoped. There's an understanding we're both on the same team completely."

While the firm's bread and butter comes from hundreds of routine personal injury kinds of cases, it makes headlines with the complex and high-profile lawsuits it handles.

For example, the firm sued on behalf of a woman permanently injured by a police baton

during a political rally in San Francisco that resulted in reforms to police training and practices. It recently defended the right of a geology professor to testify at a public hearing about geologic issues without having to register first with a state agency and succeeded in having the rule declared unconstitutional.

A lawsuit it filed on behalf of a worker injured when a propane tank exploded while he was working on it resulted in a recall and redesign of similar tanks. The firm was appointed by the court to orchestrate settlement of all claims from the deaths of seven people in a chain reaction collision on Interstate 5 caused by smoke from a field burn.

"We feel there is a real social purpose for the work ... to affect safety, to prevent accidents," Art Johnson says. "We really believe in that strong social function."

But the firm also is a business, one that brought \$75 million in payments from insurance companies and other outside sources to local residents over the past five years, Johnson notes.

"You don't think of a law office as a business," he says. "We're also proud of that."

After five decades in law, Johnson says he would have retired long ago if not for the energy of the younger lawyers in his firm and the opportunities they afford him.

"I learn something every day by working with bright young people," he says. "If you're learning, you're having fun. If I were in a lot of practices I see, I would have quit a long time ago."

JOHNSON, CLIFTON, LARSON & CORSON, P.C.

Address: 975 Oak St., Suite 1050, Eugene

Name of owners: Shareholders: Art Johnson, Jacob Clifton Jr., Richard Larson, Don Corson, Doug Schaller, Derek Johnson

Years in business: 20 years

Number of employees: 30

Family members in the business: Art Johnson and son Derek Johnson

CAPTION(S):

Derek Johnson (left) and his father, Art Johnson, work together as product liability lawyers - and on wetlands restoration on land the family owns. "We feel there is a real social purpose for the work," Art Johnson says of the law practice.

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