

Rob Segal

Philly Native Becomes Top Divorce Attorney and Gentleman Lawyer

by Dan Campana

Clothing, not the law, once appeared to be Robert D. Segal's future.

Segal long-figured he would join the family business that started after his great grandfather, a tailor, came to the United States from Lithuania a century ago. The company began with restaurant uniforms, then linens. During World War II it made military uniforms before turning to women's fashion in the 1970s and 1980s.

Segal, 53, describes the fun times he had working in the factory's shipping area with 200-pound rolls of fabric. Then there were the trips from the Philadelphia area, where his family lived, to the showroom in New York. But, as the clothing manufacturing industry became more centered in overseas markets, Segal's father suggested another path might make more sense for his son.



"Since I was sort of the academic in the family, he actually advised, 'You might want to think about doing something else and not come into the family business,'" Segal recalls. "I didn't really have aspirations of being a lawyer, but I thought law school would be very interesting."

Nearly 30 years into his legal career, Segal certainly offers no second-guessing of the decision. He's built a strong niche in family law with **Davis Friedman**, which has been a leading firm in that area of practice for many years.

Segal describes himself as offering a balanced approach to the oft-stressful, frequently complicated, world of divorce. He takes his clients' well-being personally, gives them a voice, all while maintaining focus on working toward the best outcome possible in what essentially becomes a business transaction.

"You are dealing with people who are probably going through the toughest time in their life," Segal explains. "So, you're not only an attorney, you're almost a psychologist."

Admittedly, Segal says the cases can keep

him up at night sometimes because of his investment in the matters which can take years to resolve. Yet, his efforts have been recognized by his peers as he earned a spot in the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers in 2000, an honor he values as greatly as his client relationships.

Tony Anderson has known Segal for two years through his divorce case. It all started based on a referral, yet it didn't take long for Anderson to see for himself what Segal was about.

"One, he was hands-on instead of delegating to some associate. Two, he has a great understanding of the stressful situation you're under," Anderson says. "As stressful as it was, I found him easy to work with. We've developed a good rapport."

Philly Native Finds Way to Chicago

A great deal of Segal's professional growth happened in Chicago, but he's a Philadelphia native with a backstory that didn't see him stray too far from his home base over the years.

He grew up the middle child in a "happy, home environment" anchored by his

mother, who he describes as a traditional homemaker. His father “was the worker bee” leaving the house early for 11-hour days in the family business.

“I guess it instilled a pretty good work ethic in me,” Segal offers.

Segal strived in academics and athletics, with golf his sport of choice. Yet he didn’t really know what he would do beyond high school. Working with his dad was always on his radar, especially because of the close bond they shared.

“I was so close with my dad. He really was my best friend. We had a very good father-son relationship,” Segal explains.

His parents never pressured him about college. To that point, Segal laughs a bit while recounting how he learned about “some test called the SAT” only two weeks in advance during his junior year. Segal literally walked in and took the test without studying. It worked out, as Segal was accepted to the University of Pennsylvania — the same school his father attended — where he studied economics and history, earning his degree in 1982.

The economics of the clothing industry changed in the 1980s, as competition increased and overseas manufacturing became more prominent. Advice from his father to explore options beyond the family business, which was sold in the late 1980s, became a turning point for Segal.

“I went to law school sort of by default,” he says. “I didn’t want to be a doctor, so (I thought) I’ll try law school.”

To stay close to home, he started his legal studies at Temple University in Philadelphia before heading back to Penn for his third year. Segal described Temple’s environment as being a little more grounded and focused on practical skills.

“The kids at Temple were a lot hungrier. They taught more trial skills versus the theoretical stuff at Penn,” Segal recalls. “Law school gave me the idea that I wanted to be some kind of litigator.”

Segal again thrived in the academic setting and began to understand how family law and the courtroom might be the areas he would seek out. He clerked for a sole practitioner in Boston one year, seeing what it was like for a jack-of-all-trades attorney. Segal spent his second summer with a general practice firm where he gained insights into real estate, commercial and corporate law.

“The litigation was really what I gravitated toward. It confirmed for me that

I wanted to be in a courtroom. It’s more fun getting into court,” he says.

Segal earned his law degree in 1986 and had a job lined up at a Philadelphia-based firm whose founder also was a Penn law graduate. The firm was known for mergers and acquisitions, as well as class action, securities and antitrust cases. As a young lawyer, Segal ended up doing a lot of travel to work on discovery and document reviews. The latter often involved sitting in a conference room sorting through hundreds of boxes of paperwork.

After about five years, Segal moved on to another large firm that focused on commercial and business litigation, labor law and employment. During his tenure there, Segal met his future wife, Betsy, in the months he spent in Chicago for business. They later married and lived in Philadelphia for a couple of years before they decided Chicago was the place to go. Segal used the opportunity to change his career focus to family law.

“I had done a few divorce cases, almost pro bono, at this firm I was with. I liked the

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people aspect,” he says. “The divorce area seemed more interesting. I had a better chance of building up a business here.

“Going to a new city, it’s a lot easier to attract somebody getting divorced than it is getting AT&T as your client,” Segal adds.

Daily ‘Catastrophe and Calamity’

Segal sought out divorce firms and, in 1994, landed at one he considered “very cutting edge.” In six years, he worked his way up through the ranks and benefited from the guidance of a good teacher. His cases often had him crossing paths with lawyers from Davis Friedman, which started in family law back in 1946. Those interactions made him see Davis Friedman as a place that would be a better fit for him.

“Every time I had a case with (Davis Friedman attorneys), whatever partner I was working with on the case, I really enjoyed it. They were terrific people,” Segal explains.

He was eventually asked to join Davis

Friedman as a partner, which Segal admits was a “little scary” because of family life with two young children at home and the change to his compensation structure. Segal joined the firm in 2001. It felt like he was home.

“It was a risk that immediately was invigorating and refreshing for me. I realized these were the people I really wanted to practice with,” Segal says.

Segal understands divorce lawyers don’t necessarily have the best reputation, but that helped illustrate how Davis Friedman operated with the “highest integrity.”

“Immediately my career soared. My business tripled the first year, and it’s gone up every year since,” he explains.

That growth also was bolstered by his developing relationship with firm namesake Muller Davis, who Segal considers a mentor and “like a second father.”

“Awesome lawyer and great friend,” Segal says of Davis.

Davis is equally complimentary of Segal. “We are very lucky to have Rob Segal. Obviously, there’s a premium on young lawyers who are able,” Davis offers, adding that Segal continues to grow as an exceptional attorney.

Davis points to Segal’s sense of humor, as well as his legal sensibility, as being among his key traits. Segal stepped in mid-case once on one of Davis’ files and, without much preparation, was able to get up to speed. Things turned out very well in the case

that Segal ended up handling a large chunk of, according to Davis.

Segal finds it interesting that some people think he’s too nice, which he considers an uncharacteristic compliment for his legal niche. Maybe it’s because he doesn’t subscribe to the “scorched earth” method of some divorce lawyers. Segal holds a certain disdain for using children as chess pieces in a case.

“The children need to be protected. You’ve got to put the children first. Never leverage children issues against financial issues,” he explains.

His clients typically come via referral, even from people he once opposed in cases, a high compliment in Segal’s eyes. So, what does he see as his key qualities?

“I work really hard for my clients. I think my people skills have enabled me to be somewhat successful in the field,” he shares.

“It’s a nice compliment (referrals) because a lot of people never want to see or talk to their divorce lawyer again when

the case is over. They feel like they need to take a shower and wash themselves of the process.”

His biggest current case, which he described as involving tens of millions of dollars, was referred to him by the spouse of one of his former clients. Segal bluntly says divorces aren't easy, for clients or attorneys. The cases are “harrowing,” so he aims to be personal and objective throughout what can become a multiyear experience as a sign of his commitment to the folks living through it.

His goal is to “extricate” the client from the problem and get the best deal possible. What begins as marriage ends as a business transaction, according to Segal, but he's not cold to the intricacies.

“Nobody says ‘I do’ with the expectation that they're going to break up their marriage,” he says, explaining that he puts the emotion in the background while working toward a fair resolution. “Negotiating a fair settlement is really the optimal solution. The definition of an equitable settlement is nobody is thrilled.”

J. Douglas Gray sought out Davis Friedman because of its outstanding legacy of unassailable work and found Segal a perfect fit for what he needed. Gray has known Segal for seven years through his divorce case. He valued Segal's balance of interpersonal and legal skills, and how he understood the emotional side of the situation, yet never compromised his position.

“He does a wonderful job of advocacy for his client. I was always heard and always guided. He is a good listener. He would explore or entertain different perspectives on a particular issue,” Gray offers.

Segal adds, “It's my job to bring objectivity to the table.”

He tries to avoid carrying around the “catastrophe and calamity” he sees every day.

“I care about all my clients, so naturally it's going to affect your life outside of work,” explains Segal, who has two teenage daughters — 19-year-old Allie, who attends Vanderbilt University, and 16-year-old Natalie, a junior at New Trier High School. “You have to learn to not bring it home with you.”

Still, for the self-described laid-back Segal, he wouldn't trade any of it in.

“It's never boring,” he says of his work. “This is a unique process.” ■