

JOEL LEVIN

Godfather of Guardian Ad Litem

by Elizabeth Davies

Though they divorced decades ago, Joel J. Levin and his ex-wife continue to parent their children together. They've cheered at sports games, planned weddings and celebrated new grandbabies together.

The pair decided early on that they never wanted their children to be casualties of their divorce. And that's what Levin, of Chicago's Levin & Associates, wants for all children of divorces. It's why he continues to be a champion for children in crisis, serving as their court-appointed representative and guardian ad litem.

Since remarried and the father to a stepson, Levin embraced the concept of a blended family in the best interests of all of the children.

"I have four children and eight grandchildren," Levin says. "I spent my entire career trying to protect children because I'm very passionate about helping them."

Over the course of his 45-year career, Levin has developed a reputation as an expert in protecting children through custody battles and family disputes. By some estimates, he has represented roughly 2,000 children, getting families into counseling and in some cases restoring marriages.

"You're as much a psychologist as you are a lawyer when you're dealing with divorce," says Levin, whose primary goal in cases involving children is to develop "some sort of relationship between mom and dad that focuses on the child, and not on them."

Successfully doing that means taking a long-term approach to emotionally demanding problems. He's less concerned with which parent gets to spend Thanksgiving with their child than he is with making sure the child goes unscathed during the conversations that get to that point.

"Kids are so resilient. The question is, at what price?" Levin says. "They might be fine now, but how about when they are 25 years old and in their own relationships? The divorce process does not have to be a bad frame of reference for the children in their own futures."

His compassion for children and dedication to making the best decision for them is what



caught the attention of Marvin Leavitt, a former Appellate Court judge who now practices in family law.

"He struck me immediately as exceptional," Leavitt recalls. "There are very few attorneys as invested as he is. He is such a natural with the children. When he comes and tells you what's in the best interest of the child, you know he truly is looking out for the child."

"For Joel, it's always child first. Joel is a true believer that it's not about money and it's not about winning. It's about doing what you can for the kids first. Then comes everything else."

HIGH PROFILE, HIGH STAKES

Over the years, Levin has managed cases that are both high profile and high conflict. It's not unusual for him to be involved in representing a party, or the children, in celebrity divorces

for athletes, executives and the like. He's an exceptionally skilled trial lawyer who handles the difficult and complex financial cases for individuals as well as fighting for the rights of children as a guardian ad litem.

In the high-profile cases, Levin's first move is to obtain a protective order preventing media access from details that could harm any child involved.

"Their parents may be celebrities. But in their home, they are just mom and dad," he says. "It is a very private matter and should be handled as such for their best interests. They're already going through enough of a tough time. Parents are the two heroes of all children. When children discover their parents are flawed, sometimes that can be devastating to a child. And to live it out in public is not helpful to the children."

“It’s nobody’s business, and it should stay that way.”

In all cases—prominent or not—Levin angles to do right by the children. In one case, that meant recommending that a socially challenged boy not be sent to a school that his father felt would be a better fit for his special needs academically.

That’s because, when Levin went to the boy’s existing school—the one where his mother sent him—he found a place that gave the boy more than just academics. The child, who had autism, struggled to make friends and physically couldn’t keep up with other kids. However, Levin learned from his gym teacher that the boy was actually on the basketball team. He couldn’t run or shoot very well, but the school welcomed him onto the team regardless.

The teacher told Levin it was more important for him to participate and be part of a team than it was for him to play.

Then one day, the boy went to a school dance. It was a social step no one ever expected him to take. Without the boy knowing, Levin quietly attended the dance to observe. And as Levin looked on, a female classmate went to the boy, took his hand, and began dancing. The sight made such an impact on Levin that he could not, in good conscience, take that child from a school that treated him like family.

“Let’s embrace his differences and make a whole human being of him,” Levin says.

That’s not so different from a time when Leavitt was at odds with Levin over a case. Leavitt was representing the mother, another lawyer was representing the father, and Levin was guardian ad litem for the children—one of whom suffered from recurring ear infections.

Leavitt’s client, the mother, wanted her child to stop swimming because she believed that was the cause of the ear infections. The father, a physician, argued that there was no medical basis indicating swimming was the cause, and he wanted the child to have tubes surgically inserted in his ears.

As it happened, Levin agreed with the father. He went to a well-known children’s hospital and brought in a pediatric eye, ear, nose and throat doctor to testify. In the end, the judge ruled that the child should stop swimming for six months. The ear infections cleared up without surgery. But the case left an indelible impression on Leavitt, who was impressed that Levin stuck to his beliefs on behalf of the child, despite their own personal friendship.

“We don’t always agree, but we both are always looking out for the children,” Leavitt says. “He wasn’t going to agree with me just

because we are friends. And you wouldn’t want a child representative or guardian ad litem who does that.”

THE EARLY DAYS

A lifelong athlete, Levin was a member of the second graduating class at Niles North High School, near his childhood home in Skokie. He received a tennis scholarship to Western Illinois University, where he studied journalism in hopes of one day working as a reporter. But by the time he graduated college, the world was a different place. The Vietnam War was in full swing, and college graduates were being drafted.

Levin instead headed to IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law, graduated and began as a sole practitioner in 1973. Starting out on his own meant Levin had to quickly learn the law without the aid of a mentor.

“It was trial by ordeal,” he says, adding that trying a lot of cases gave him the experience he needed. “It’s a lot of thinking on your

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feet, adjusting to witnesses, adjusting to judges, knowing when to talk and—more importantly—when to shut up.”

Levin’s trial acumen and his passion for children naturally led him further into the arena of family law.

“I love the hope in children,” he says. “When I look at them, they are a blank chalkboard, and there’s so much we can do with them. Given the opportunity, we have the ability to impact their lives in a positive way, despite the divorce of their parents.”

By 1978, Levin had focused on divorce with a special emphasis on protecting children in custody cases. He found he had a natural talent for bringing perspective and level-headedness to emotionally charged situations. His ability as a trial lawyer made him formidable whether representing a party or the children.

“I am pretty good at helping people emotionally through a hard time in their life,” he says. “I try to make this part of their life a little easier. I don’t mind the conflict. I have a

good understanding of where they and their children are at this point, especially when the children are in crisis.”

But that doesn’t mean his work is particularly fun.

“I don’t hate my business,” he says. “I hate the fact that it is a business. In the business world, you might have a bad day and not make a sale. Somebody in my business has a bad day, and they lose their child.”

Leavitt says Levin has been involved “in some of the most significant litigation in this area,” giving him an air of impartiality that has both sides of a case willing to call on him for his special expertise and skills,

“He’s always available, and he expresses concern in real ways,” Leavitt says. “This is exactly the person a litigant would want.”

BUILDING A LEGACY

Despite not having a mentor, Levin feels strongly about helping to shape young lawyers. In the past, Levin taught law school classes at Chicago-Kent on children and divorce. During that time, he donated his salary back to the family law clinic—preferring instead to be paid with the satisfaction of knowing he was cultivating a new generation of lawyers who care. He is a frequent lecturer at other law schools and has presented many times for the Illinois State Bar Association and the Chicago Bar Association.

These days, Levin is building three younger associates into his office. One of them is Levin’s daughter-in-law.

Christina S. Levin joined the firm in 2002 as a law clerk and later as an associate. She met Levin’s son during college and then went to law school as he went to medical school. Today, the pair have three children. Christina has worked alongside her father-in-law for the past 14 years.

“We have a very good relationship,” Levin says of his daughter-in-law. “It’s easy for me because she is very smart and we work very well together.”

Next, Levin welcomed a second associate, Kimberly Reklau. With both lawyers, Levin made a point of bringing them in on his cases, having them sit second chair for a while, and then launching them on their own. Recently, a new lawyer, Michael Partiplo, joined the firm and is acquiring skills developed by Levin over these many years.

Christina Levin remembers her first trial out of law school. As she questioned her first witness, her opponent — a far more experienced lawyer—began objecting to nearly every question. When it became clear she was getting upset, her father-in-law asked for a short recess and imparted some of his

wisdom to the embattled young lawyer.

“You never let them see you sweat,” he told her. “Go in there and finish what you started.” Christina did just that.

“And then when it was their turn to ask questions, Joel proceeded to object to pretty much every question his opponent asked, sending the message that his firm was not going to be intimidated, ever,” she recalls.

Christina says that within the Levin family, Joel is known as Mighty Mouse because he’s always coming to the rescue.

“I can’t begin to tell you how many phone calls Joel has returned for me because I was at my wit’s end and had convinced myself that the issue was insurmountable. Joel gets on the phone and somehow five minutes later there is a plan, and everyone is on board.”

The fact that there’s a new generation at Levin’s firm doesn’t mean the 69-year-old firm founder is going anywhere.

“I have no intention of retiring,” he says. “I have way too much energy. There is work to be done. In our field, we can truly impact families and protect their futures.”

According to his daughter-in-law, that’s pretty accurate.

“After 45 years, he’s committed to the work,” she says. “He’s in by 7 a.m. and often doesn’t leave until 7 p.m. He very much loves what he does, particularly when he’s representing kids.”

Motivated by his mantra of “making a difference,” Levin tries to make sure each child knows they have an advocate who will make their voice heard. He’s quick to recall the divorce of a North Shore power couple whose battle was particularly hard on one of their three children. He assured her that he was in her corner, and he got to know more about her. One day, he appeared unannounced at her high school basketball game to watch her play, just as he promised he would.

About 10 years later, that girl was part of a seminar Levin conducted for judges and child representatives in which some of his former clients were called in to discuss their experiences. By that time, she was a law student herself, but she broke down in tears while recounting her story, sharing that she still struggled with relationships.

“The only person I’ve ever trusted in that process was you,” she told Levin. “You told me I could count on you. Just in that 2½ year relationship, you changed the course of my life. I am going to Pepperdine’s law school intending to do the same work.”

And that, of course, is why Levin pushes on.

“For me, that was a big victory,” he says. “I made a difference.” ■