

Mom, daughter share another affinity: law

By Tom Hallman Jr.
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The mother came to it late, discovering her passion for law when she was 29, living in a rural community and raising four girls. The youngest daughter came to it naturally, knowing what she wanted to be when she was 2.

Now they're partners — Kohlhoff & Welch, the mother's name going first, of course — working out of a small building in St. Johns, across the street from a tavern.

They're a different breed. The offices are spare — not a leather sofa in sight. They have no secretary, paralegal, typist or even a janitor. They answer their own phones.

Last Friday, Theresa Kohlhoff, 59, and Elizabeth Welch, 32, revealed just how they approach the business by doing something unusual. They opened their doors to the North Portland community, inviting anyone who had a legal question to stop in for free advice. They wanted to target people who see lawyers only as a profession portrayed on television. They plan to of-

fer the service every few months.

"We're not seeing sexy cases," said Welch, who also donates time with her mother to provide legal advice at Northeast Portland's St. Andrew's Legal Clinic, which focuses on domestic violence cases.



Theresa Kohlhoff

"There are places for people who are desperate," said Welch, while her mother sat in a conference room with a woman who took the firm's free offer. "But what about

people in the middle? What about the person who has a small legal question? Not dire need, but some help with direction. That's like getting a doctor's appointment for a cough. People don't want to spend the money. But a little advice could save trouble down the road."



Elizabeth Welch

On Friday, the pair expected to see 10 clients with questions about wills, bad credit reports and calls from collection agencies.

Although every mother-and-daughter relationship can be charged, the pair have managed to work together and not bring work home since forming a partnership last summer.

"Oh, we've had some arguments," Welch said with a laugh. "She is my mother."

But Welch also considers her mother a role model and mentor.

"I grew up in a law office," she said. "My mother's first office was in our home. My first job was when I was 5, and she told me to cut a story about her opening her office out of the paper. My second job was taping it back together."

When the first client of the day left, Welch's mother joined her in the outer office to explain her own path. In the 1970s, her husband found a job and moved the family from Portland to Philomath, a small town outside Corvallis. Kohlhoff commuted to Portland State University to finish her undergraduate degree, and she knew she wanted to continue.

"Law appealed to me," she said, adding that no one in her family had ever been a lawyer. "I knew that I'd never know

everything, and that appealed to me. I knew I'd be constantly learning."

She was admitted to the Northwestern School of Law at Lewis & Clark College. She commuted to Portland. "I rolled from home at 3:30 in the afternoon and got back at midnight," she said. "Then I did it again the next day."

Welch remembers being hauled to class as a toddler — because child-care arrangements had fallen through.

"It seemed that everyone was so smart," she said. "I knew what I wanted to do then. The joke was that I was going to go into practice with my mom."

Kohlhoff eventually opened an office in Wilsonville. After a divorce and remarriage, her new husband bought the St. Johns building, a former dental clinic. One day, Welch was looking over the place with her mother when her mother

pointed to a vacant room and said, "That can be your office."

The offer appealed to Welch, who also graduated from Lewis & Clark's law school.

"I'd done all kinds of paralegal work for firms around the city," she said. "I wanted to be on my own. But I was concerned about her authority and having my own voice. I've found that we can get along because we can be honest with each other."

The door opened, and Ken Bartus stepped in for advice. "It means a lot," he said. "It gives me direction with little steps and helps me make a decision."

The "free" part was unexpected.

"I'm a contractor," he said. "I get people asking me for free advice all the time. But that's how I make my living. What they're doing is a real service."

And with that, he headed back to the conference room. ■

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