

# It's All in the Family

*By Teresa Statler*

**W**hat's it like to practice law with your mother? Or, for that matter, with your father, brother, or in-laws? The Oregon bar has several family-based law firms, including the Hungerford Law Firm in Oregon City, Welch & Kohlhoff in Portland, and the Paulson Law Firm in Portland. Members of these firms report that keeping the practice all in the family is, in general, very satisfying and a good career move, allowing for variety and flexibility.

All five family members and partners of the Hungerford Law Firm are graduates of Lewis & Clark Law School in Portland. Theirs is the only firm in Oregon specializing exclusively in school law and public sector law. The firm was founded in 1981 by mom Nancy, who was previously a teacher and small business owner. Nancy was a sole practitioner for 14 years and never anticipated practicing law with her children. While Nancy attended law school at night, her children, Andrea and Brian, were in elementary school, and they often accompanied her when she went to the library to do research. Laughing, Nancy says that's how the law got into their blood.

In later years, Andrea and Brian learned more about their mother's law practice, but she says she never especially encouraged either to be a lawyer. Nonetheless, both Andrea and Brian earned environmental law certificates at Lewis & Clark.

After passing the bar, Andrea liked the idea of working with her mother and her clients, so she thought she'd try that for a while. Now she can't imagine practicing law any other way: "There's no [other] way I would feel more supported." Both mother and daughter like the more independent lifestyle that their family partnership allows. Andrea also says that practice within the family is "a good dynamic, because a lot of practicing law is strategy and talking it out."

Now mother, daughter, and son practice together, each out of a home office. (Just over a year ago, they closed their firm office in Oregon City, deciding that it was not necessary.) Recent additions to the firm include Andrea's husband, Richard Cohn-Lee, in 1999, and Brian's wife, Jennifer, in 2002.

Each of the five partners has his or her own area of specialty. Brian and Jennifer, who are the parents of year-old twin girls, focus their practice on employment law issues. Andrea and Richard, parents of three young girls, often handle hearings and other litigation, and often do so together. Andrea reports (unsurprisingly!) that child care can be an issue when she and her husband are away from home together on firm business. And they can't just call Grandma, of course, because she may be out of town on firm business, too!

Jennifer Hungerford joined the firm after five years representing plaintiffs at a small firm. She says, "At every family gathering, they were always talking about work. I wanted to be part of that." She likes the clients and the flexibility of working from home, and she enjoys practicing law with her husband.

One downside to a family firm is finding coverage during family vacations.

As Nancy puts it, "If you want to have a family vacation together, often there's nobody left to handle things." And Andrea, the firm's managing partner, says that questioning her brother or husband about the number of hours billed on a matter can be awkward at times.

Nancy's advice to others thinking of a family practice: "You have to like each other and get along. You need to have clear ideas of each person's role, and you need to be flexible." Or, as Jennifer says, "It takes the right family-and I found the right family!"

Like Nancy Hungerford, Theresa Kohlhoff was a mom with small children who went to law school. Unlike Nancy's, however, only one of Theresa's four children followed her into the law, her youngest daughter, Elizabeth Welch. On June 10, 2006, Theresa and Elizabeth opened their north Portland law office: "Kohlhoff & Welch, Attorneys at Law, A Mother Daughter Partnership." This wording appears on their business cards, office signs, and marketing materials. Clearly, both are proud to be mother and daughter, practicing law together. "In a practice like ours," Theresa says, "you remain a family member, even in the office."

Theresa, who had been a sole practitioner since 1980, finds practicing with her daughter to be a major adjustment in her professional life, but still a good move. For the previous five years, she had practiced out of her Lake Oswego home, handling a variety of matters, including lien foreclosures, termination of parental rights, and appeals. Before that, she practiced in Wilsonville and Philomath. Now she finds her professional life "perfect."

Both mother and daughter are, in Theresa's words, "intense, organized, and detailed." It thus seemed natural to her that they would someday practice together. She sees it as a continuation of their family life. Theresa remembers that Elizabeth "was six when I started my law practice, and has grown up around it. She also always loved to play 'office' as a little girl."

Elizabeth remembers her mother commuting to Lewis & Clark Law School from Philomath. "Sometimes,

she had to take me with her. I'd sit in the classroom quietly and play with my toys." After graduating from college in 1997, Elizabeth worked for her mother as a legal assistant and later, while in law school, for a plaintiff's personal injury attorney. After passing the bar in February 2006, she started looking for work. Elizabeth says: "My stepfather had just bought the office building in north Portland. My mother was showing me around one day and sort of jokingly said, 'Here's your office.'" At the time, Theresa was thinking of scaling back her practice. Instead, the two ended up going into practice together, with a goal of serving the St. John's community. The partners hope their practice will grow, especially in the areas of plaintiff's personal injury, conservatorships, and estates and trusts.

As a new lawyer, and the single mother of a four-year-old, Elizabeth (an OWLS member) finds practicing law challenging at times. She says she feels incredibly fortunate to be in practice with her mother and to have her support. As for advice to others who want to practice in a small family firm, Elizabeth recommends that you assess whether you can stand your own ground with the family member in question. She says that you truly need to be able to say no when necessary.

Another self-described "lucky" lawyer is OWLS member Jane Paulson. Jane practices law in Portland with her father, Chuck. They handle plaintiff's personal injury and medical malpractice cases at their two-person firm, the Paulson Law Firm.

Jane joined her father's already established practice in 1995, after clerking for a federal judge and working for several years at a defense firm. She found this prior legal experience quite important—it gave her the confidence to be partners with her very experienced and well-respected father. She also believes that it gave her more of an appreciation of what her dad's professional life had been.

Like Nancy Hungerford, Jane suggests that before going into practice with a family member, you be sure you like each other and get along, both socially and professionally. "We work well together, and we have complete trust in each other," she says.

*Teresa Statler, a sole practitioner in Portland, practices immigration law.*