

THE McCORMICKS

After 30 Years of Marriage and Law, the Thrill is Still There

by Olivia Clarke



Margaret H. “Peggy” McCormick and Steven D. McCormick met in 1977 in Spain.

A recent DePaul University Law School graduate, she wanted one more trip to Europe. She chose Spain so she could learn Spanish and incorporate it into whatever area of law she went into. She immersed herself in a Spanish course that met eight hours a day for three months.

Mutual friends knew Steve, a young lawyer at Kirkland & Ellis, would be in Spain at the same time and suggested the two meet overseas.

“I’d been there two or three weeks and I hadn’t spoken any English,” she said. “While he was there, I found out I passed the bar and he understood what that meant. It was a great way to meet.”

Now married 27 years, they have four children, two successful law careers and one connected life. They represent different political and legal perspectives—she a liberal immigration lawyer who started her own practice in 1980 with her brother, and he a more conservative big-business litigation lawyer at Kirkland & Ellis.

Making it work

As they sit in their Chicago living room overlooking Lake Michigan, they describe how they share a similar love for their family and for their legal practices.

They say they find a way to meet in the

middle when it comes to political differences, and both appreciate the sacrifices and pressures that go into practicing law.

“We both really understand the demands of the other’s job and we really support each other, but to a limit,” said 61-year-old Steve, who has been practicing law for 36 years. “Peggy’s genius is she’s completely supported all the sacrifices I’ve had to make up to a point and then at a point she says, ‘stop.’ She’s been a voice for not taking that next case or not making that next commitment and I’ve tried to do the same thing for her.”

Peggy gives the example of a surprise Boston trip she planned for Steve as an anniversary gift. She checked ahead of time with everyone to make sure he didn’t have pressing work. But after she surprised him and they were driving to the airport, she said he was “a basket-case about putting aside the work.” She realized he wouldn’t enjoy himself so she had the cab driver turn around.

At the same time, when they were raising their children, they tried to make a habit of the whole family going each weekend to their Michigan home so they could physically separate themselves from their jobs.

“One of us would say on Friday afternoon, ‘I can’t possibly get out there,’” said 55-year-old Peggy, who has been a

lawyer for 30 years. “Sure enough we would get up there and all [the work] waited until Monday. We had so many family memories of our life in Michigan.”

They have three biological children between the ages of 17 and 25, and one 21-year-old adopted daughter.

When Peggy went to China to meet with U.S. Consular officials for a client, she met a businesswoman, Franny, a naturalized US citizen born in China. Franny was concerned about her niece, Yao, a seventh-grader in a year-round boarding school who was very unhappy. When Peggy learned that Yao had a valid U.S. visa, she invited Yao to visit her family in Chicago.

Yao was much happier with the McCormicks, so they obtained a student visa so she could stay longer and go to school with their children, Peggy said.

Little by little, Yao became part of the family. Steve and Peggy adopted her when she was age 15, and today she is a math major at the University of Notre Dame.

Marjorie McCormick, their 22-year-old daughter, said she’s gotten the opportunity to travel to many different places because of her parents’ jobs—her favorite being China. And while she doesn’t know if she wants to be a lawyer, she has learned a few things from them, she said.

“There are a lot of lawyers in general in the family and a lot of arguments at the

table,” Marjorie said. “We can debate pretty well. They both worked a lot when I was growing up. But we always had a lot of special things we got to do with them.”

Judge Joan H. Lefkow, who went to Northwestern University School of Law with Steve and met Peggy through mutual friends, introduced the couple.

She said she and her late husband Michael spent about a year in Spain and their first child was born there. Peggy asked them for advice when she was considering traveling there. And when Steve was going to Spain, the Lefkows suggested he look Peggy up.

“They are very happy together and certainly very generous,” Lefkow said.

Lefkow gives an example of Steve and Peggy’s generosity. When her daughter got married in 2005, many family members traveled to Chicago. Peggy and Steve offered to go to the country so that some of the wedding guests could stay in their condominium.

She describes both of them as smart, conscientious and ethical lawyers.

“I know Peggy is very prominent in the immigration bar,” she said. “Steve is very distinguished and has been named one of America’s top trial lawyers. He’s just very dedicated. He loves being a lawyer.”

Balancing their professional and family lives can be challenging, the McCormick couple said. One reason they raised their children in a downtown apartment was so they could be home quicker.

And being away from his family for stretches of time when he’s working on out-of-town cases is the hardest part of the job, Steve said.

“It was hard in the early years when he was gone, but when he came back he would pull away and take some real time and have extra time with the kids,” she said.

Creating careers

When Peggy and her brother started their own firm, her practice involved representing people on the defensive side of immigration.

At her husband’s prodding, she started attending black-tie events at Kirkland & Ellis and networking with other lawyers.

After one event, she got a call from a Kirkland partner who referred her to the chairman of Bayer because the company had an immigration issue. That became her first corporate client and the beginning of her immigration employment work, which she does almost exclusively today.

In addition, she has taught immigration law courses for 21 years at Loyola

University Chicago School of Law. And she's very active in national immigration policy work through such organizations as the American Immigration Lawyers Association, which she was president of in 1997; and the American Immigration Law Foundation, which she was president of from 1999 to 2003.

While at the foundation, she helped create the Immigration Policy Center because she wanted a place where there could be accurate facts, studies and information about the positive effects of immigration.

Peggy is currently on the board of governors of the American Immigration Lawyers Association; on the board of directors of the American Refugee Committee; and on the board of directors of the Chicago Chapter of the Federal Bar Association, where she chairs the Lefkowitz Fellowship Committee.

"When I got into immigration, it was very unusual for there to be firms hiring," she said. "It was mostly solo practitioners or maybe two partners. I didn't know anything about immigration at all, but I wanted to speak Spanish. My goal was to speak Spanish and do law.

"Meeting people from all over the world is a very gratifying process. I've enjoyed my time as a lawyer very much. I've been very blessed."

When she and her brother started McCormick & Hallagan, they had eight professionals working at the firm. Today, she can proudly say that their firm, Minsky, McCormick & Hallagan, has 25 professionals. The firm's client base includes everyone from Fortune 500 companies to individuals with personal immigration issues.

Running a firm comes with many challenges as they must constantly build and maintain the business, while at the same time handling cases, she said.

Jim Hallagan, Peggy's brother who she works with at the firm, said his sister has always been outgoing and is an organized lawyer. She likes participating in committees and enjoys working with immigration policy, he said.

Steve said he believes his wife's practice

is the most interesting of anyone he's ever known because each case has such important implications.

"The stories she's had over these many years, one after another, are just gripping stories of people whose whole lives are going to be changed if they are able to get here and whose whole lives are going to be changed much for the worse if they are not or if they have to go back to where they came from," he said.

Steve said he discovered law through a close family friend who was a very successful trial lawyer in St. Louis. He was a summer associate at Kirkland & Ellis and was assigned to Donald Kempf, who Steve describes as "an extremely charismatic and ultimately successful trial lawyer."

That experience convinced him that he wanted to be a trial lawyer, he said.

"I just think there is nothing else in the profession even comparable to standing up and being someone's champion in the courtroom," he said. "I have cases that I won 20 years ago that I can sit here on a quiet Sunday morning with my cup of coffee and I can turn those over in my mind and still feel the glow and the thrill. But there is another side to that coin.

"I have scars that are 20 years old. They still hurt a lot, not quite as much as the day I got them, but that is the nature of the job. To go through this is a tremendously taxing exercise. But to fight for somebody in the courtroom and be successful is a thrill like no other in the profession."

With each case Steve works on, he learns something more and improves as a lawyer, he said.

One his more memorable cases was *Breed Technologies v. Honeywell International, Inc.*, a 2006 39-day jury trial in Polk County, Fla. He represented Honeywell International, a defendant in a dispute arising from the sale of a business by Honeywell to a competitor.

It was filed in a small town where the plaintiff had been one of the largest employers, he said. He won that case, which was featured in *The National Law Journal's* 2006 Ten Winning Attorneys edition and in the June 2006 *American Lawyer*.



Steve and Peggy in 1977 in Spain when they first met.

Another case he found memorable was the *United States v. N.L. Industries, Inc., et al*, a 1990 criminal antitrust jury trial in New Orleans federal court. He represented the defendant in this antitrust case that charged price-fixing conspiracy among oil field services companies. One alleged co-conspirator pled guilty and testified as a government witness, but the rest of the defendants were acquitted.

"A lot of people think when you represent corporations, it's all kind of abstract," he said. "It is just some big company and who cares what happens to that company. But it is really never about a company. It is always about the people."

He said he's most proud of standing up for tobacco companies when "they were vilified and so unfairly accused of things absolutely false."

At one point, it was very popular for Congress, the press and the public to attack tobacco companies for a problem that was everyone's problem, he said.

"Without a doubt [Steve] is one of the best trial lawyers in the United States," said Larry Levine, a retired partner at Latham & Watkins who now owns his own practice. He went to law school with Steve and used to work at Kirkland. "He is tough and principled, which is often an unusual combination in high stakes litigation."

By the time Steve's gone to trial, Peggy has probably already heard his opening statement—or at least a version of it, Steve said.

Peggy said it's interesting to get a bird's-eye view of his cases, which only enhances her ability as a lawyer. Steve must handle high-level, very complex cases and make the information understandable to a jury, she said. He often tests information on her to gauge her reaction and understanding, she said.

They disagree on few of the hot-button political issues despite coming from different political sides.

"I'm involved in an area of the law that whatever political persuasion you are there are people for or against it," she said. "I think more people ought to be able to find common ground who have different political points of view. If more people did then maybe it wouldn't have to get so horribly contentious."

When Peggy and Steve met, he told her that he should get down on his knees and thank God everyday for his job—a sentiment they both seem to share even today.

"My kids complain sometimes that 'you are gone so much,'" he said. "And I say, 'I will make you a deal. You find a job for me and I don't care about the money, whatever it pays it pays. You find a job for me where I can get as big of a thrill out of it after 36 years as I did the day I started and I never have to leave Cook County and I'll take it.'" ■

Peggy and Steve celebrate their son Kevin's wedding in 2005. From left: daughter Yao, son Daniel, daughter-in-law Angela, Kevin, Peggy, Steve, and daughter Marjorie.

