

Michigan attorney knows full well the dynamics of a family-run firm

By Brian Cox

For the past decade or so, attorney Melissa Demorest LeDuc has gathered once a month with a small group of professionals who share one thing in common: They all are part of a family business.

The “Next Generation in the Family Business” peer group provides its members a confidential place to openly discuss the challenges and experiences that are encountered by those poised to be next in line to lead a family business or small enterprise.

“It’s a somewhat unique position to be in,” says Demorest LeDuc, who 17 years ago joined the business and real estate law firm her father founded in Royal Oak, Mich. “Most of us don’t have friends we can talk to who are also in a family business.”

The peer group is organized under the umbrella of MichBusiness, a business association that provides small businesses with resources and educational programs. Through sharing experiences and best practices, the peer group forum can help members find solutions to common issues surrounding conflict resolution, succession, leadership, and other general business concerns. The mix of family and business can produce issues that require special sensitivity. With respect to confidentiality, the group has what Demorest LeDuc likens to a “Vegas policy” – what happens in the room stays in the room.



Attorney Melissa Demorest LeDuc with her husband, Jeff, and their two children, Mae and Harley, pose for their annual Memorial Day golf cart selfie, a tradition the family has followed since the children were babies.



Demorest LeDuc is well acquainted with the peculiar dynamics involved in a family-run business. In one sense, she grew up in her father’s practice.

“I’ve been in law offices as long as I can remember,” she says, recalling the many weekend hours she and her siblings spent entertaining themselves with office supplies and the copy machine while their father worked. When she got to high school, she worked summers at the firm doing clerical tasks.

It only seemed natural then that she should join Demorest Law Firm, PLLC, after graduating from Wayne State University Law School in 2005.

Her father, Mark Demorest, is a Harvard grad who after earning his juris doctor from University of Michigan Law School began his career at a large Detroit law firm. In time, he opted for the culture and autonomy more typical of smaller firms, and in 1998, he launched the Demorest Law Firm – the very weekend, in fact, that his oldest daughter moved into college at the University of Michigan.

“It was a crazy time,” says Demorest LeDuc with a laugh.

More than 25 years later, the firm serves as outside counsel for a range of small- and medium-sized businesses and offers expertise in business law, real estate and construction matters, employment law, hospitality law, and litigation.

Demorest LeDuc would advise new attorneys considering going to work at a parent’s law firm to first gain some experience working with people who are not family and then to consider closely whether everyone’s personality is compatible in a work environment.

“My dad and I are both pretty calm and rational and don’t generally have problems getting along,” she says. “If you work with family, be prepared to have some conflicts and learn to separate out those conflicts or have someone who can act as a mediator.”

Demorest LeDuc and her husband, Jeff, have been married almost 10 years. The couple met at a Detroit Tigers baseball game and now have two children: Mae, 7, and Harley, 5. They are fans of University of Michigan basketball, to which they have season tickets, and enjoy spending time in the northern part of the state

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at a house Jeff's great-grandfather built in the 1940s on 80 acres of land.

The oldest of five children, Demorest LeDuc describes her own childhood as "busy and loud." She was active in sports (particularly softball and soccer), choir, and Girl Scouts, and often filled in as "babysitter and assistant driver." Her mother, Pat, is a retired pediatric nurse who also worked in a neonatal intensive care unit for many years.

"My parents were involved with everything," says Demorest LeDuc. "I played on a softball team that didn't win a single game – but they came to most of my games. They've always been devoted to going to everybody's stuff. They like to support everybody and what they're doing."

In college, Demorest LeDuc earned a degree in economics with a minor in French and Francophile Studies. She was a member of Phi Alpha Delta, an international pre-law organization and coached lacrosse.

During law school, she worked a summer for a personal injury and medical malpractice defense firm but didn't feel the field aligned with her sensibilities. The following summer she returned to the familiar environs of the Demorest Law Firm to "get a more realistic legal perspective" on what her father and the firm did. The greater exposure to business and real estate law helped her pinpoint her focus.

"We've always done business and real estate work here," she says. "We work with a lot of business owners. I got a fairly good exposure to real estate transactions, business transactions, setting up businesses, and litigation related to that. I found I liked working on the transactions."

She describes her father's mentoring style as largely hands off, tending to let her figure things out on her own, but always available if she had questions.

"One good thing about the way my dad does things is that he let me get involved in cases pretty quickly," she says. "I got a lot of experience early."

Over time, she did less litigation and began to concentrate increasingly on business formations, mergers and acquisitions, and real estate transactions. Her clients largely consist of entrepreneurs, hotels, apartment complexes, bars and restaurants, and – appropriately enough – family-owned businesses in the Detroit metro area.

"There's always something going on," she says. "I handle multi-million-dollar transactions, but we're a four-lawyer firm."

She characterizes the firm's culture as relaxed and friendly, which can foster more personal interaction and openness with clients. While a small firm, Demorest Law has a reputation for being a sophisticated practice.



Melissa Demorest LeDuc and her husband Jeff, who will soon celebrate their 10th wedding anniversary, were introduced at a Detroit Tigers baseball game.



"We tend to do a lot of work that big firms typically do," says Demorest LeDuc. "I think that's partly because of my dad's background, starting out in a big firm. Our clients trust us to take stuff on that sometimes they may take to a big firm otherwise."

Helping contribute to the firm's range of service is its membership in Primerus™.

"Primerus™ is a great resource for our clients who might need somebody in a different state or another country, whether it's for a quick question or a larger issue," says Demorest LeDuc, who is on the Primerus™ Community Service Board, which coordinates the society's community service efforts, and the executive committee of the Women Lawyers Section.

She says the Primerus™ network and the experience of the attorneys at Demorest Law allow the firm to offer its clients help wherever they need it.

"We can help with reviewing a contract, we can help with a multi-million-dollar transaction and anything in between," says Demorest LeDuc. "If you get the job done at the end and it costs a third or a half of what a big firm would have charged, I think that's what clients appreciate."