

Tampa attorney making a name for herself in transportation field

By Brian Cox

Florida attorney Heather Stover says she takes after her father, Art. In so many ways, actually, that she is on occasion referred to as “mini-Art.”

Like her father, who ran his own plumbing company for decades, Stover characterizes herself as a self-starter with a strong work ethic who tends to be business-minded and straight to the point.

Also, as her father did, Stover is now dedicating most of her time and attention to maintaining and growing a business. As the co-managing partner of the Tampa law firm Ogden Sullivan Stover Saar, P.A., Stover has teamed up with colleague Justin Saar to guide the more than 30-year-old firm into the future even as she works to establish herself as one of the few female leaders in trucking and transportation defense.

Stover and Saar joined the firm in 2018 and became equity partners in 2022. Tim Sullivan, with two other attorneys, founded the civil trial law firm in 1990. Stover says managing the firm has



Heather Stover and her father, Art Stover, at a Tampa Bay Lightning game.



involved its share of on-the-job training, but figuring things out is almost second-nature to her. She’s been doing it most of her life.

Born on the east coast of Florida in the small town of Jensen Beach, Stover learned early to “figure things out on her own” after her mother died from breast cancer when Stover was 10. Her father raised her and her younger brother largely on his own, which wasn’t easy with a business to run as well. Stover became the cool, calm and collected child who followed the rules and got good grades. In school, she was a self-described “popular nerd,” studious and involved in a range of academic clubs while also making time to have fun with friends, a core group that, 20 years later, she speaks with daily and make up a group of her biggest supporters.

She had the makings of a future lawyer, but at the time a law career was the furthest thing from her mind.

“I wanted to be in the FBI,” she says, giving off a bit of a Sandra Bullock vibe. She adds with a laugh, “I got bamboozled is how I became a lawyer.”

At the University of Florida in Gainesville, Stover was initially a psychology major, but a criminology class turned her onto the idea of getting a doctorate in the field and then either joining the FBI or becoming a college professor.

The father of her boyfriend at the time, however, was a prominent medical malpractice defense attorney in Miami, and he suggested to her that a law degree would be a faster route than a doctorate.

So she went to law school, enrolling at George Washington University Law School in D.C., with the intent of never returning to Florida. It took one winter to convince her otherwise. She also didn’t like the highly charged political environment.

“I did not grow up in a political home,” she explains. “It was a culture shock to go from a politically sheltered environment to D.C. Everything was so political and everyone would get so worked up and angry – I didn’t understand it and I did not like it. I prefer my laid-back Florida – not every disagreement needs to come back to politics.”

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During law school, she explored different areas of law through several internships, including one within the Department of Justice's Child Exploitation and Obscenity Division, where it was suggested she start at a state attorney's office as a stepping-stone to the FBI. She also interned with the National Network to End Domestic Violence where she worked on the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women's Act. Other internships were with a nonprofit legal aid clinic as well as a federal judge in south Florida.

Following the advice she was given during her internship with the DOJ, Stover became an assistant state attorney in Palm Beach after earning her juris doctor and passing the bar. After her experience left doubt that criminal law was the route for her, she joined the very law firm where the attorney who first encouraged her to go to law school worked.

For the next three years, Stover became immersed in learning the ins and outs of medical malpractice defense. Working under an experienced and demanding female attorney, Stover gained valuable experience in reading and summarizing medical records, communicating with experts, answering discovery, and getting to the bottom of what happened in a case.

"I learned everything under her, really," says Stover. "All the important building blocks that you need. I didn't take things personally so we worked well together."

She enjoyed the variety and complexity of the medical malpractice cases, but after three years she was ready to broaden her horizons and transferred to the firm's Tampa office where she started handling a variety of other types of cases in the realm of premises liability and automobile negligence.

"It was always something different, which I really liked," she says.

Stover felt she had found where she would work the rest of her career.



Heather Stover and firm co-founder Tim Sullivan unintentionally in matching outfits at work.

That career course changed nearly four years later when Sullivan approached her about joining Ogden Sullivan. He was devising a succession plan and was looking for people who could carry on the firm after he retired. Stover is best friends with Sullivan's daughter-in-law and he had heard from her about Stover's work ethic and commitment to quality product. He thought Stover might be exactly the kind of attorney he was seeking. Around the same time, he had started talking with Saar, who had grown up with his children.

"Tim jokes that his hiring method is to hire his kids' friends," says Stover.

Though at first unsure about making such a dramatic career move, Stover was convinced to make the leap to a smaller firm with a faster route to the top.

"If I'm going to work this hard, I might as well reap the financial benefits," she decided.

Stover and Saar now divide shareholder responsibilities for the firm's management. Saar concentrates on the financial aspects while Stover handles areas involving human resources such as training and staffing.

"I've always liked mentoring and training," she says. "It fulfills the professorial part of me. Probably the most challenging part of this job is that there are not enough hours in the day to do the management related tasks fully and to the extent you may want



Heather Stover with her high school friends on their 2022 annual girls weekend, enjoying Bern's Steakhouse in Tampa.

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to combined with your day-to-day case tasks. Once your name is on the door, clients want you on their case.”

She has turned her attention to creating a culture at the firm that is more relaxed and flexible, when possible. Once eligible, the firm now offers to attorneys and paralegals the option to work two days a week from home and has relaxed the in-office dress code.

“I’m trying to create a more laid-back environment because our area of law is so stressful,” she explains. “We have to offer more of a work-life balance in order to retain people.”

Her practice is now concentrated on transportation defense, which has been a longtime focus of the firm. She is a member of the Trucking Industry Defense Association and is on its Interactive Education Committee, which organizes webinars. She was recently accepted into the Federation of Defense and Corporate Counsel and also is a member of the Primerus™ Transportation Executive Committee as well as its Managing Partner Committee. While she doesn’t consider herself a “trailblazer” quite yet, she appreciates that as a female attorney she is more of a rarity in the transportation field.

“I look around at all the transportation seminars and, by and large, it’s men,” she says.

Sullivan has been a driving force behind Stover establishing herself in the trucking and transportation field.

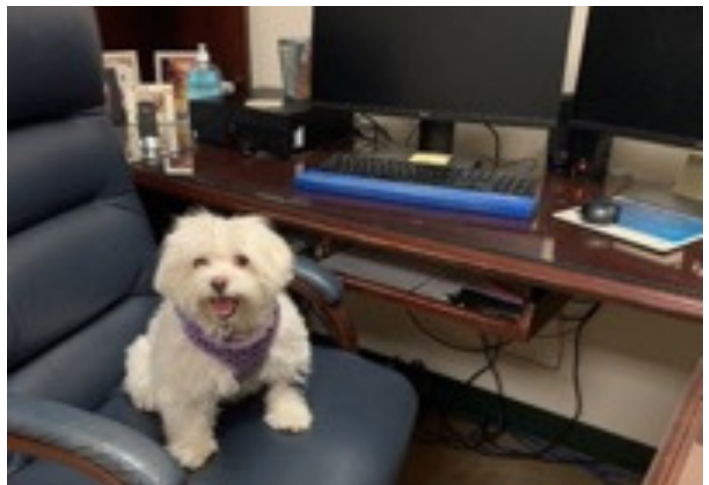


Justin Saar and Heather Stover at the 2022 Transportation Industry Defense Association (TIDA) Annual Seminar.

“Tim has been a big proponent of me getting into this area of law because of how limited it is female-wise,” says Stover. “He really has pushed, made critical introductions for me and brought me along to events. The goal is to be out there and have everyone in the industry know who I am.”

The majority of Stover’s time right now is committed to managing the firm and developing her practice. She learned from her father that the time demands of a successful business are often high. She does make an effort to take time to decompress each week. Fortunately, she has two dogs who help her unwind – a Yorkie mix named Toby and a Maltese named Lulu.

“For people who don’t have kids, when you have dogs, they’re your babies,” she says. “I highly recommend dogs for people in high stress positions.”



Heather Stover believes dogs can help relieve stress so, from time to time, Lulu, who is a sweet and gentle soul, makes an appearance with Stover to bring some extra joy to the office.



Heather visits a local pumpkin patch with her beloved dogs, Lulu and Toby, with whom she enjoys spending as much time as possible.