

An early interest in politics helped steer Wisconsin native into the legal profession



By Brian Cox

One of David Gengler's earliest memories is watching the returns of the 1994 midterm elections on television when he was 11. He recalls the excitement around the "Republican Revolution," which saw the Republicans win control of both the House and Senate for the first time in 40 years.

"It was really interesting to me to see all of that happening and developing," he says.

The interest in politics stuck. Gengler grew up in Appleton, Wis., in a family where politics and current events were always part of the background, and he read widely. His father introduced him to Tom Clancy novels, and Gengler noticed something about the politicians who populated those stories: They were invariably lawyers.

"I was like, oh, so if you want to go into politics, you've got to go to law school," he says.

By the time he arrived at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Gengler was already looking toward both politics and the law. He studied economics and political science, joined the College Republicans and volunteered on political campaigns. He also spent time in legislative and lobbying offices, getting a firsthand look at the machinery of government.



David recently visited Mario Motors at Universal Orlando with his wife, Laura, and their three children, Ethan, Aubrey, and Brody.

Madison offered another kind of education. Coming from what Gengler describes as a fairly conservative household, he found himself in a much more liberal environment. He was often in the political minority, both as an undergraduate and later at Wisconsin Law School.

He came to appreciate the experience and recognizes it as formative.

"I was being exposed to other people's positions," he says. "And what I learned was how to have discussions with people, to listen to their positions, understand their positions, and be able to kind of have arguments about that."

Perhaps the best example was sitting right next to him. Gengler's closest friend, Ben, had grown up in a Democratic, liberal household. Gengler came from the opposite end of the political spectrum. As teenagers, they joked about how they should not be friends.

And yet they became best friends.

They learned how to argue, tease each other, and move on. More importantly, they learned that disagreement did not have to become personal. They remained close through college and law school, eventually standing as best men at each other's weddings.

"You have to be able to have discussions with people and you have to be able to disagree and not share entire belief systems and still be able to get along and to still like each other on a personal level," Gengler says.

It is a lesson that seems particularly relevant to Gengler's legal career. His work now involves persuading people, assessing competing positions, and communicating with clients, opposing parties, and attorneys around the country.

Gengler's path to that career took a few turns. He graduated from Wisconsin Law School in 2008, just as the economy was collapsing. The government-affairs opportunities he had envisioned were scarce, so he took a position with a Minneapolis firm that had a Brookfield office and began handling collections work.

The work would eventually become a significant part of his career. But after roughly two years, the firm downsized its

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The Gengler family (l-r) Ethan, David, Aubrey, Laura, and Brody, attend church regularly at St. Matthews Parish in Oak Creek, Wis.

Brookfield office from eight attorneys to four. As one of the newer hires, Gengler was out of a job.

The timing was particularly difficult. He had recently become engaged, and the legal market offered few obvious alternatives. Gengler had to keep looking, take contract work where he could, and rely on perseverance.

"You have to learn to persevere," he says. "There's a lot of people out there looking for a limited number of opportunities."

In May 2012, he found an opportunity at Kohner, Mann & Kailas, S.C. (KMK). It proved to be a turning point. Gengler had married Laura shortly after joining the firm, and he found an environment that accommodated the demands of family life while giving him the opportunity to work alongside experienced attorneys.

"I personally have a sense of loyalty to the firm because they gave me an opportunity when I really needed one," he says.

That sense of loyalty has lasted 14 years. So has his genuine affection for the people around him.

Today, Gengler focuses on creditors' rights and the liquidation of commercial debt. His practice can involve anything from negotiating payment to managing litigation over disputes between businesses. Because those matters can arise anywhere in the

country, he also maintains relationships with attorneys in other jurisdictions who can represent KMK's clients locally.

The work may sound straightforward from a distance, but Gengler sees considerably more beneath the surface.

A business may refuse to pay because it disputes the quality of a product. A debtor may be struggling financially or preparing to file bankruptcy. A client may believe it should pursue a claim when the better advice is to walk away. A successful judgment, after all, does little good if the company on the other side has no ability to pay it.

Sorting through those questions requires judgment, but it also requires communication. Gengler has to understand what his clients actually need, explain the risks, and persuade them when necessary. He has to do the same with opposing counsel and the attorneys he brings into cases around the country.

The skill has roots in those early political arguments with friends and classmates. Gengler learned to listen closely enough to understand another person's position before responding to it. That does not mean agreeing, he says. It means respecting the person on the other side of the argument.

Gengler grew up in a family where relationships and traditions mattered. His grandfather, Ken, was proud of his Irish heritage and made St. Patrick's Day a family event, complete with a large dinner featuring his own version of corned beef. As his grandfather grew older, Gengler began helping carry on the tradition. He has since taken responsibility for keeping it going.

His mother supplied a different kind of childhood memory. The two spent years playing Nintendo's *Zelda* games together. When Gengler was young, he would help her get past difficult sections of the game. The tradition continued even after he went to college.

"I'd come home for spring break and she would say, 'Dave, I've been stuck at this part. Help me out,'" he recalls.

Today, Gengler has three children of his own, and family life occupies much of his time. He coaches, drives to practices and games, and tries to create the kinds of experiences that become family memories.

His first experience coaching his daughter Aubrey's basketball team was particularly rewarding. Over seven or eight weeks, girls who had barely known one another before the season became close friends.

"What was really fun was seeing these girls who had never met," Gengler says. "They got so close and they had so much fun together."

He has also discovered that he is considerably better at hunting than many of his friends would prefer. Gengler had never been much of a hunter, but while visiting his in-laws' property in northern Wisconsin, he decided to give it a try. After shooting a crossbow a few times at a target, he went hunting and bagged a deer almost immediately.

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His hunting friends were less impressed by his accomplishment than by the apparent ease with which he had achieved it.

"I was like, this is easy," Gengler says with a laugh.

Politics remains an interest, and Gengler still wonders whether there might someday be a place for him in public life. For now, however, he has found a career that draws on many of the skills that first attracted him to politics.

And he has found a professional home that he values for much the same reason he values the relationships he has built elsewhere in his life.

Earlier this year, the firm recognized Gengler's hard work and dedication by electing him as a shareholder. He was praised for aggressively pursuing and enforcing his clients' legal rights and for demonstrating a track record of collecting substantial amounts for KMK's clients, often in cases involving debtors from whom the client has given up hope of ever collecting a single dollar. Gengler is also the firm's primary representative with the Commercial Law League of America, advancing the firm's critical partnerships with counsel across the country.

Gengler's appreciation for KMK reflects the breadth of the firm itself. Its attorneys handle business and financial matters, commercial litigation, and collections, giving clients access to a range of legal services as their needs change. The firm's collections practice works with business creditors throughout the United States and beyond, combining out-of-court efforts with litigation when necessary.



A lifelong Wisconsinite, David and his family are committed Green Bay Packer fans.

That range means that Gengler can focus on his own practice while knowing that experienced colleagues are available when a matter presents a more complicated legal question. It is another reason, after 14 years, that he continues to regard KMK as a place where he has both the resources to serve his clients and the colleagues he wants around him.

"It's a good group of people," Gengler says. "The firm has a lot of hardworking people and a lot of very smart people who provide a wide range of services for clients. There's a lot of legal experience and real-world experience. We've got a very good roster here. And I'm very lucky to be a part of this firm."