

BOB ZAWIDEH

Trust and Estate Trial Lawyer Strives to Make a Lasting Difference

by Jordyn Reiland



TROY—Robert S. Zawideh discovered at 17 what he wanted to do for the rest of his life.

In high school, Zawideh was asked to play the part of a lawyer in a school play about a murder trial. The role fit him better than the old suit he wore as a costume.

Older and wiser now, Zawideh concedes it was an instinctual decision, but he thinks back to that time with fondness.

“Truth can be found in a 17-year-old’s instinct,” he says.

These days, Zawideh is a partner and senior trial attorney at The Kemp Klein Law Firm in Troy, representing clients in jury and bench trials involving high net worth trusts and estates. Throughout his career, he has represented clients in federal and state courts in Michigan, California, Ohio and Illinois.

William H. Horton, of Giarmarco Mullins & Horton PC, has tried a few cases alongside Zawideh and is impressed with his courtroom skills.

He says Zawideh is “smart, direct and has a

good sense of humor”—the last trait being a valuable skill not all lawyers possess.

“A lot of times lawyers are way too formal in front of juries,” Horton says. “In the courtroom, every once in a while, showing a little sense of humor is important to break up the tension.”

WHAT STARTED IT ALL

Zawideh grew up in West Bloomfield as the youngest of five children. His parents came to the United States from Jordan and opened their first of a chain of restaurants long before Zawideh was born.

Growing up in the restaurant industry, Zawideh knew one thing: He did not want to be in that business.

“During every holiday, we would have dinner at 10 p.m. (because my family would be working at the restaurant all day),” Zawideh says. “While everybody was enjoying the holidays and family time, my family was working.”

After graduating from high school, with the idea of being an attorney etched in his mind, Zawideh attended Michigan State University and earned his bachelor’s degree in “Justice, Morality and Constitutional Democracy.”

James Madison College at MSU offered a unique undergraduate program for developing critical thinking skills as the primary objective, not just memorizing information and reciting it back during an exam.

Zawideh then secured his law degree in 1990 from Wayne State University Law School.

After working as an associate at a law firm in Flint, Zawideh decided to start a firm with his wife, attorney Arlene Sesi. The two worked alongside each other at Zawideh & Sesi for a decade.

“If you really want to test yourself, co-chair a trial with your significant other,” he says jokingly. Zawideh says he learned Arlene is a perfect partner. They have complementary talents: She gives attention to details, and he approaches things with more of a 1,000-

foot view.

Prior to joining Kemp Klein, Zawideh worked in other law firms on complex franchise and commercial litigation cases across the country as well as in Michigan.

MAKING A CONNECTION

Zawideh's early experience in front of an audience may have primed him for speaking in front of a jury.

"Standing up and speaking in front of people, whether it is public speaking, theater, anything like that, if you are getting up in front of others, standing and being convincing, it is a good exercise and confidence builder," he says. "Obviously you want to develop those skills when appearing in front of a judge."

Zawideh says that when arguing in front of a jury, you must understand that every person in the jury box has a different perspective.

"It is as much about the law and the facts as it is about the perception of your presentation," he says.

He believes it is vital to make a compelling and persuasive presentation, to keep the jury interested in what you are saying, all while ensuring you are not overwhelming them with too much detail.

"You have to always know your audience," he says. "As an attorney trying a case in front of a jury, your audience is a group of people who would rather be doing anything other than listening to you. Lawyers owe it to these folks to tell the story effectively and not waste their time."

A CHANCE CALL

Zawideh first met his future partners at Kemp Klein through a former opposing counsel, Joseph P. Buttiglieri. Zawideh and Buttiglieri were on opposite sides of a multimillion-dollar estate fight where there was no will or trust.

The dispute involved title to joint accounts the husband and wife opened with various relatives across the city.

When the case closed, Zawideh, Buttiglieri and another attorney on the case became friends and later met a few times to catch up. Zawideh recalls vividly the story of how he joined Kemp Klein.

In 2010, Zawideh was looking to make a professional move, and the thought came to him out of the blue to call Buttiglieri and mention it. It had been a couple of years since they'd talked: "How did you know?" Buttiglieri asked.

"Know what?" Zawideh replied.

"That we are looking for a senior attorney, not some kid out of law school," Buttiglieri said, referring to the timing of his call and

Kemp Klein's then immediate need for an experienced litigation and trial attorney.

Nine years later, Zawideh looks back at that moment as a blessing.

"I am very grateful that I got the opportunity to join this firm," Zawideh says.

Much of the work he does is in probate, estate and trust litigation. "It was really eye opening for me because I did not do that type of work much before."

SUCCESS COMES IN DIFFERENT FORMS

Zawideh has realized during his career that a truly gratifying result does not always come from the big-dollar cases, but from the clients who appreciate someone who goes to bat for them. He recalls a case involving a married couple where the husband worked for an apartment complex. They lived there as part of the compensation.

The apartment complex wanted to let him go and gave them no time to find a new place to live, Zawideh says.

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With Zawideh's help, he was able to buy them about 90 to 120 days to find another residence, which they successfully did.

"I remember how his wife cried because she just appreciated the fact that somebody went to bat for them," he says. "That sticks with you in this business."

While every case is different, most trust and estate disputes revolve around a consistent theme: Fights that were decades in the making break out among family members.

"I didn't really appreciate that when I first joined the firm," Zawideh says.

He quickly learned, however, that understanding family dynamics is key to resolving these disputes because, at the end of every case, the parties will still be related to each other. "They will see each other at weddings, baptisms and funerals."

Zawideh believes legal skills are certainly important when it comes to serving clients in a probate and trust practice. But a lawyer's reputation is every bit as important, and

maybe more, when trying to get the job done.

"Early on in every attorney's career we hear, 'Reputation means everything, your word is your bond, guard it zealously,'" Zawideh says.

"In probate and trust litigation, you develop a name and reputation very quickly. The attorneys who are your opposing counsel today might be your co-counsel the next day, or your mediator next month.

"It's important to litigate with integrity because it pays off when you get the chance to litigate with other attorneys who know how you practice," Zawideh says.

Zawideh believes what makes him a successful lawyer is his commitment to the client.

"I don't tell the client what they want to hear. I tell them what they need to know," he says. "Avoiding litigation, avoiding trial, is always in the client's best interest. My clients appreciate that I am there for them first, not for me."

Attorney Janet Douvas Chafin, a partner at Jackson Walker LLP in Houston, has seen Zawideh evolve into the client-oriented, responsible and honest lawyer he is today.

The two have known each other for nearly a decade. Chafin was recommended to his firm for a personal estate lawsuit and, after the conclusion of the lawsuit in 2014, the two have remained colleagues and friends.

Chafin says Zawideh was "sharp" and "eager as a sponge" as well as "very responsive, creative and thoughtful."

"I would send clients to him in a heartbeat," she says.

A FATHER'S INFLUENCE

Zawideh's first day at Kemp Klein was May 28, 2010—eight years to the day his father, Sam Zawideh, passed away. Zawideh remembers fondly the way people spoke, and still speak, about his father.

Zawideh recalls a story Zawideh's uncle told him of a doctor he met on a trip to New Zealand. On learning of his relation to Zawideh's father, the doctor told Zawideh's uncle that Sam Zawideh was his favorite teacher in Jordan, where Sam Zawideh was born.

"He was the reason I became a doctor," the doctor said.

For Robert Zawideh, his main goal throughout his professional career has been to emulate his father's honor, his sterling reputation, and his ability to change lives for the better.

"My dad was all about how he influenced people, and in some way or another I have always wanted to be a man, like him, who makes a lasting difference for somebody," he says. ■