

CELEBRATING 30 YEARS



GH & A | GENTILE,
HOROHO
& AVALLI, P.C.

Turning 30

Practice areas

Estates & Trusts

Estate Administration
Estate & Trust Litigation
Estate Planning
Guardianships
Executor/Administrator/
Trustee Fees

Family Law

Divorce
Support
Child Custody
Child Support
Alternative Dispute Resolution
Paternity
Modern Families
Prenuptial and
Postnuptial Agreements
Protection from Abuse
Contempt and Enforcement

Lawyers at Gentile, Horoho & Avalli reflect on Three Decades of Family Law Practice

Twice yearly, the Family Law Section of the Pennsylvania Bar Association meets for presentations, discussions, continuing education, and networking. In between, of course, are countless private conversations where the business managing a law firm is done.

At a 1991 meeting, Pittsburgh lawyers – Gary Gentile, Mark Goldberg, and Charles Voelker – got together to bring closure to discussions they had been having. Their conversations had been provocative, the prospects encouraging, and the potential exciting.

“Okay, are we going to do this?”

And so started the family law firm of Goldberg, Gentile, and Voelker, incorporated on October 1, 1991.

Among the first lawyers hired was Kerri Lee Cappella, a young lawyer one year out of law school. Two years later, family law attorneys Ken Horoho and Harry Gruener left their own namesake firm to join. In 1999, Charles Avalli brought his estate planning and litigation practice along.

A few retirements later, as well as the untimely passings of founders Gary Gentile and Harry Gruener, the firm of **Gentile, Horoho & Avalli, P.C.**, is now 30 years old and generally regarded as one of the premier family law and estate planning firms in Pennsylvania.

Three of the principals who have seen the firm through all (or most) of its history sat down to reflect on the passage of three decades, the triumphs and tragedies, the lessons learned, and the plans for the future of their firm.

The lawyers



Kenneth J. Horoho, Jr.



Charles J. Avalli



Kerri Lee Cappella



What was the family law community like in 1991?

Ken Horoho: In the '80s and '90s, it was mostly the smaller boutique firms that did the good family law work. There were some of the bigger firms that tried to establish their family law departments, but that didn't really work out well. I think the primary reason is the big firms didn't really understand the practice, the billing practice, the collection practice. They had business owners as clients that, if they took on their divorce matter and it didn't work out in the client's favor, they weren't happy. Now it's 2022 and some of the bigger firms have hired family law lawyers. But the constant has been the boutique. Unlike Philadelphia, I think it's still the smaller boutique firms, five- to 10-person firms, that really have the majority of family law work.

What would you say has been the reason for your longevity?

Chas Avalli: I think one of the things that gives us longevity is we all do similar things, but we do not, as a general rule, do them together. With very few exceptions, a partner doesn't work on another partner's files. For the most part, I work on my files with whoever is working with me. So, we have the ability to pick other people's brains on issues on cases, but you don't have the direct butting of heads over a case. We call the balls and strikes on our own cases.

It's been my experience that most firms usually end up breaking up over either a personality clash or money, or maybe it's a combination of both. And we've never had any fights over money. We find ways to deal with that, and we've handled the compensation among the partners the same way since the day I started.

Ken Horoho: The bread and butter of this practice is being able to attract all levels of clients and provide services to them in an effective and efficient manner.

Chas Avalli: We've always been lucky that nobody owns us. If our largest-billing client were to walk out the door tomorrow, we're going to be fine. I think that's normal in family law, but I do not think it's normal for a lot of law firms. So that circumstance has given us stability that has stayed over time and helped us through that.

How have things in the practice of family law changed over the past 30 years?

Ken Horoho: You can answer that question with the changes of the Divorce Code and certain cases that have come along. For example, Pennsylvania used to be one of nine states that obligated parents to continue to support their children through college. And then that was deemed to be unconstitutional.

And again, the changes to the Divorce Code that determine just how you can get divorced. If you're not going to consent, there used to be a three-year waiting period, then two years, and now it's one year. That changed the dynamics.

Kerri Lee Cappella: Moving from two years to one year of separation was a considerable game changer.

Because there were circumstances where we would have counseled a client not to file for divorce because they could continue to receive support a little bit longer. Now, the date of separation, the 12-month period, really doesn't make that big of a difference in terms of that strategy.

There's also less predictability because we have a significantly larger bench in the courthouse. We started out with four judges, and we now have 10 to 15 in the adult section and juvenile sections.

Ken Horoho: The other thing that I think we've seen generally over the last 10 or 15 years, whether it's federal court or state court is the push toward mediation, mandatory mediation. We've seen that in family law, and in fact Kerri's a trained mediator, and we have others in the firm as well.

What do you know now that you wish you had known 30 years ago?

Ken Horoho: That you really can't be a general practitioner in the family law area. You really have to pick two or three areas within family law and try to really drill down, whether in the pension and retirement area or the tax area or custody. We now are bringing in experts a lot earlier because we recognize no matter how long you have been doing this; you really have to have somebody with more expertise to help guide you on these complex issues.

The other thing we've seen change is the economics of the Pittsburgh community. In the early '80s, we had a lot of Fortune 500 companies here. So, a lot of people getting divorced were from those companies, and they were big cases. As time has gone on, over the last 20–30 years, as that corporate business has shrunk, so have those cases. This is not LA or Chicago. There's only a certain amount of those types of cases now because we just don't have the same business community. That's affected the family law practice.

Kerri Lee Cappella: Remember that valuing a medical practice was a bigger part of our practice until the big healthcare organizations started acquiring the practices. There are still pockets of these private entities, but far fewer.



What is the best advice you would give to someone who is considering **marriage**?

Ken Horoho: For anyone who is preparing to get married, I would say, “Consider a prenuptial agreement.” We do so many prenups now. I think there’s been a stronger emphasis on that especially in second divorces and when the family business is being transferred to the next generation.

Kerri Lee Cappella: I think the sophistication of the clientele is higher. As couples marry later in life – and later in life may not be 50, it may be 30 – they still have had five to 10 years of work experience and asset accumulation. Going back to the medical community, we have a lot of young people in healthcare who may have just finished their residency and know that going forward they’re going to be making a lot of money. Perhaps they’re starting out in the tech industry and seeing what their long-term income growth potential is.

What do you think the practice of **family law** will look like in the near future?

Ken Horoho: As society changes, the law will change. In just the last five years, look at the increase of grandparents’ rights in custody cases. You know, the rights of people getting married of the same sex. So, when those cultural issues change, we can anticipate that we’re going to be right there. The Supreme Court and the legislature will try to keep up with that.

Chas Avalli: The heart of the law is not going to disappear. Our business is always going to be there. It’s going to have different nuances as things evolve over the years, but a lot of what we do isn’t going to change substantially. We have to understand economics and the cultural changes that Ken is describing.

Kerri Lee Cappella: Good times and bad times can both provoke a dissolution of a marriage. We have seen a couple of serious recessions over the last 30 years, and we’ve seen some booms in the last 30 years, and there hasn’t been a considerable change in divorce rates one way or the other.

Are there moments from the past 30 years that you will always remember?

Ken Horoho: I had this crazy case in Mercer County that started before my son was born and ended when he was age 11. You know, and it was back and forth through the Superior Court five or six times, Supreme Court two or three times. So, you know, there are those types of crazy cases that will always be on the top of your list of the most memorable.

Kerri Lee Cappella: I had a case in which I began representing a mom when her child was a year old. He wrote me the loveliest note after his bar mitzvah, which said, "I wouldn't be here without you." He just graduated from high school, and the case is now over.

Chas Avalli: Gary Gentile's passing. We knew it was coming. But he had such an enormous personality that pervaded everything. And there's a big vacuum as a result of that. You can't replace a Gary Gentile. You never try to. But you know, we've continued, we've prospered since then, and that was in my mind the single biggest event.

Kerri Lee Cappella: Every day, when I'm confronted with a question or a situation or a case or a nuance on something, I ask myself, "What would Gary do?"

He had the humility to come into my office or go into one of the other attorneys' offices and say, "Hey, I've got this situation..." He may already know the answer, but he would go to somebody else.

What do you want the legacy of this firm to be?

Ken Horoho: Mark Goldberg and Harry Gruener were in the room when the Divorce Code was first drafted in 1980. There was a core of lawyers that helped develop the Code and then they set out to develop the law. So, I hope the legacy of the firm would continue to be that we have good lawyers who are on the cutting edge of the practice of family law and that we all look forward to the challenges in the practice of family law for the next few decades.

Chas Avalli: We have a very good reputation in the community. I think we're pretty damn good, and I think that that's an important quality and a tribute to all of us over the years. We've never tolerated mediocre work. You can't control results, but you can control effort. And I think we're talented enough that if we do that, we'll accomplish some good things.

Ken Horoho: And do it efficiently as well as effectively. There are no unlimited budgets in these cases, so you have to develop ways to do it efficiently whether that means bringing in paralegals, associates, getting experts involved where they can do things cheaper than you can. All along the way, I think we've been able to develop those types of relationships where we can tell our client, "You know, the strongest characteristic of this firm is you're going to have good representation, and we'll do it effectively and efficiently." We're pretty proud of that.



What is the **future**
of the firm?

Ken Horoho: The future of the firm is bright. The firm boasts four other talented attorneys who are on the cutting edge of the practice of family law. Together with the “historic” members of the firm, they carry on the legacy of providing the highest quality of work to our clients. Lorraine Mervan has practiced family law for 30 years. Carla Schiff Donnelly has been with the firm more than nine years and has practiced for more than 25 years. Robert Weinberg joined the firm in 2016 and has practiced for more than 15 years. Finally, Alexandra Kovalchick joined the firm in 2018 and has practiced for more than 15 years.



Lorraine Mervan



Carla Schiff Donnelly



Robert Weinberg



Alexandra Kovalchick



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