

The Small Law Firm - Making It!
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(Photograph by Jamie Escarpeta)



Can a small law firm endure and even prosper in the age of mega-mergers?

Consider the case of Mason, Griffin & Pierson, a hometown practice whose hometown happens to be Princeton. There it has been firmly ensconced for 45 years.

The firm of had its origins in the early 1930s at Camp Wilson on the Delaware where young Ralph Mason, a counselor, met even younger Gordon Griffin, a camper.

Following World War II, they met again at a reserve officers meeting in Trenton. By this time, Mason was practicing law with a Princeton firm and invited Griffin, a law student, to join him there. In 1955, they founded the present firm at a Nassau Steet address. There were several name changes over the years as partners came and went. With the arrival of Kester Pierson, the present name was assumed. By 1985, the firm had outgrown its quarters, and, eschewing Route 1 or Route 206 locations, settled into a new building on Poor Farm Road, where the staff has grown to include 17 attorneys. A continued but gradual expansion is anticipated.

But for this small, hometown law firm, changes have gone far beyond the size of staff and building, Edwin W. Schmierer, a managing director who joined the firm in 1977, recalls, "In those days, everybody did a little bit of everything, and the firm was truly a general practice firm. We did everything from matrimonial to criminal to adoptions to workers compensation.

Anything that came through the door, we did."

Then the legal climate started to change and now the firm encompasses specific practice areas, a situation Schmierer attributes in large part to the information explosion. This development, he notes, has made it difficult to be an attorney for all persons for all things.

"Just to stay up to date in your area of practice requires so many things to be done on a daily basis," he advises. "Not just reading the Law Journal, but access to the Internet and being involved in different organizations. We're finding that the solo practitioner and the very small law firm are becoming things of the past."

Schmierer adds that attorneys can no longer feel confident doing a little of everything. "Clients almost demand that you be an expert. They expect you to have information on their particular concerns off the top of your head, rather than saying that you'll research the problem and get back to them." So, Mason, Griffin & Pierson has changed with the changing times, evolving from general practice to groups of practitioners who specialize in litigation, real estate and land use, employment law, estates and trusts, governmental affairs, and business banking and entertainment.

Over the years, they've served as legal representatives for local municipalities including Princeton Borough and Township, Montgomery Township, and the Boroughs of Hightstown and Hopewell. These positions have expanded in scope as the municipalities have grown. The "of counsel" addition of William P. Deni of Flemington has added a practitioner in criminal defense and family law to the staff, as well as expanding the firm's presence into Hunterdon County.

Mason, Griffin & Pierson staffers are also active participants in extra curricular activities, such as publishing articles and books on various aspects of law, addressing professional associations, and representing the firm by serving on the boards of corporations, hospitals, educational institutions, and other charitable organizations. They also serve on municipal and bar association committees, and lend a hand with various community endeavors.

Many aspects of legal life appear to be in a growth pattern, from the size of firms to the number of practice areas - and of course, the number of attorneys. According to Kester Pierson's recollections of 40 some years ago, there were fewer attorneys in the whole of Mercer County at that time than there are in Princeton today.

In the late 1950s, he advises, Princeton had no more than a half dozen law firms, none having more than eight lawyers on staff. Today he estimates that the town has at least 250 attorneys, and Mercer at least 1500.

"We can't help but grow," says Gordon Griffin. Most of the attorneys hired by the firm are home grown. "They've worked for the judges at courthouses in Mercer and Hunterdon County and they have roots." Advises Schmeirer - We like to hire people who've come back here, who want to make a home here and grow their practices."

In a profession where so much has changed, there are certain constants, and the attorneys of Mason, Griffin & Pierson feel that adhering to these traditions has helped ensure their success as a relatively small firm in an era when many company rosters look like the cast of "Gone With the Wind."

"My colleagues here and I think there's always going to be a place for a community-based, small to mid sized law firm that provides services that the people and the businesses of the community will need," says Schmierer. "After 45 years, we've developed a reputation and a rapport with the central New Jersey community where we practice."

"They know that they can get good service at a fair price from, hopefully, a talented bunch of lawyers. As long as you can deliver on that and believe that's what you are, I don't think there's any reason why a small size firm can't continue and prosper."

Schmeirer observes that there are certain areas in which smaller firms have an edge over the bigger players. "We're delivering a good product, good legal advice, and doing it in a timely way. We're having good relationships with the people we deal with. We've sown confidence. If someone calls on a given day, they'll get a return call that day. We're not so big that voice mail has to be reviewed at the end of each day. We have live people to take phone messages, people who can relate to the clients who call. Our staff develops relationships with them as well, and when there's a certain urgency, the staff will be alerted to that.

Relationship-building is of major importance at Mason, Griffin & Pierson. "We pride ourselves on our availability to be prompt and responsive to people's needs," says Schmeirer.

Adds Gordon Griffin: "We must be furnishing the kind of service that our clients want, otherwise we wouldn't be in business."