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Equitable Equilibrium

Keystone Law Group attorneys find work-life balance while litigating probate and trust cases.

By Glenn Jeffers
Daily Journal Staff Writer

LOS ANGELES — When Shawn S. Kerendian moved Keystone Law Group PC into its west Los Angeles offices three years ago, he figured he had found enough room to grow. Now, as he finalizes plans to hire the firm's 11th attorney, Kerendian finds he's running short of space.

"I did anticipate some growth," said Kerendian, the 36-year-old managing partner. "I didn't expect it to be this fast."

Another problem? Keeping up Keystone's caseload and reputation as one of the largest probate litigation firms in the state. Launched in February 2014, the firm handles more than 200 matters dealing with probate, trusts and estates.

While many of those cases deal with administration, the firm is known for litigating difficult cases and producing favorable results.

"It kind of reminds me of 'Casablanca,' when they say, 'Round up the usual suspects,'" said Eric R. Adler of Long Beach-based Magee & Adler APC, which handles estate planning and litigation. Adler has opposed Keystone Law on previous matters. "Before I'd ever litigated against Keystone, I knew they were in my realm."

That specificity is intentional, Kerendian said. He started the practice to handle disputes over a decedent's final wishes. Most of the time his firm comes in during a difficult time for clients.

"They wouldn't qualify the last year or two of their lives as their best," he said.

Though handling the legal and emotional issues are challenging, Kerendian finds concluding a matter rewarding and not just because of the result.

"They can start grieving," he



Courtesy of Keystone Law Group PC

From top left, associate Sarah A. Spacht, senior associate Samuel L. Birdsong, senior associate Monica C. Yun, senior associate Roe Kaufman, senior associate Timothy D.F. Barteau, associate Teal M. Schoonover. From bottom left, of counsel Verlan Y. Kwan, managing partner Shawn S. Kerendian, partner Joshua D. Taylor, senior associate Lindsey F. Munyer.

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said. "When the litigation happens, they're usually spending money hiring an attorney and fighting with family members. They're not able to focus and release the grief they've been holding."

It also helps that work is steady. The market for probate litigation has grown, according to a 2018 report on court statistics from the Judicial Council of California. Statewide, 49,152 suits were filed in probate court during the 2016-17 fiscal year (the most recent data available) up nearly 11 percent from the 2014 fiscal year when Keystone opened.

Lindsey F. Munyer, a senior associate who joined Keystone in October 2014, said most of her opposing

counsel are either civil litigators who rarely handle probate cases or probate lawyers who mostly focus on estate planning.

"When you talk about trust and estates, people automatically go, 'Oh, you can do my will?'" she said. "It's just not on anyone's radar that there is litigation associated with it."

But Kerendian isn't worried about giving away any secrets to his firm's success. In fact, he'd like to see more attorneys specializing in probate litigation.

"The case goes a lot smoother," he said. "It becomes less expensive for the clients. The judges appreciate it."

He paused for a moment then

added: "We welcome it. We're confident in our abilities."

If there's a hint of competitiveness in Kerendian, it comes from growing up in a competitive family full of lawyers, including several cousins and a brother who runs a litigation firm in town.

At first, Kerendian had no intention of becoming a litigator while at Loyola Law School. He found an interest in estate planning while taking a wills and trusts class and dug into the substantive side of the law.

Kerendian went to work at his brother's firm and soon found his niche about a year later when a set of beneficiaries came to him for help. A trustee had loaned out

hundreds of thousands from a family trust. Kerendian was able to get the money back and get the trustee removed.

“Our clients got what they were entitled to, and I thought that was cool,” he said. “It was a natural fit.”

Kerendian spent the next several years developing his probate litigation practice before branching off and starting his own firm in 2014. At first, Kerendian said, he was hesitant about hanging a shingle, but he had two distinct advantages.

The first was Verlan Y. Kwan. She had worked with Kerendian since 2010 in litigation and administration. Joining the new firm as counsel, Kwan saw the same market opportunity Kerendian had and believed in his plan to tap into it.

“He had a vision,” Kwan said. “He’s put a lot of time and effort and sweat into this.”

The second was Kerendian’s wife, Biana, a human resources professional who worked previously at various accounting and law firms, including Katten Muchin Rosenman LLP in New York. Coming in as operations manager, she knew how to set up the firm.

But many of the firm’s lawyers say Biana’s biggest contribution

was instilling a culture of respect that permeates throughout the firm and extends from the managing partner to the reception desk.

“Respect is number one,” she said. “We feel that everyone is equal and should feel comfortable in brainstorming and asking for help.”

That culture can also be seen in the hiring process. Several Keystone attorneys will interview prospective hires to see if they fit. Often, Biana will speak with the firm’s receptionist to see if the potential hire was rude or inconsiderate. “It’s those little things like that we try to pay attention to throughout the process,” she said.

Kerendian said he relies on the process to find the best people, something as critical to the firm’s success as their probate acumen.

“She’s huge on culture, and that’s not always the number one thing you think of when you’re hiring,” he said. “I lean on her in deciding who’s a good fit for our culture. I appreciate it, and I see the results.”

One such hire was Joshua D. Taylor, a partner who joined the firm in August 2014. A former associate from Heller Ehrman LLP, Taylor left the big law firm to find

more of a work-life balance. After a year traveling through South America and Asia, he found himself back in Los Angeles, working for nonprofits.

When he joined Keystone Law, Taylor found that sought-after equilibrium in probate law.

“It has all of the intellectual rigor of big-firm life,” he said. “But you’re dealing with real people who have real problems who are really thankful. So it has that aspect of public interest life.”

Taylor also found a partner-in-probate in Kerendian. The two regularly pair up on cases, including a recent suit where an ex-spouse discovered his former partner had died, but not before rewriting his will and leaving his estate to a boyfriend he met on seekingarrangement.com, a popular “sugar daddy” website.

Initially, the case worried Taylor because a well-known estate planning firm had prepared the new trust, and it seemed airtight. Then he went to a firm-wide breakfast the next morning.

“Shawn says, ‘I thought about it last night. We can represent the nieces,’” Taylor recalled.

In the previous will, the partner

left the estate to either his spouse or, should they divorce, the spouse’s two nieces. The nieces had a claim to the estate. After filing suit, Taylor and Kerendian invalidated the new trust by arguing it was a payment for prostitution, given how the two met.

“My mind didn’t even go there,” Taylor said of representing the nieces. “That’s one of the things I love about this firm, the brainstorming aspect. Having these other people that you can bounce ideas off of is invaluable.”

The firm reached a favorable settlement with Adler, the Long Beach attorney who represented the boyfriend in the matter. “There was no gamesmanship, and everything was handled appropriately,” he said. “They got good results for their clients.”

What’s next for Keystone? That’s simple, Kerendian says. Whatever his team wants.

“If the others want to grow and move to where they can supervise, that’s what we’ll do,” he said. “I’m happy with our size. I have enough work. I’m busy. But, the firm was created to last longer than me. That’s why it’s called Keystone and not Kerendian.”